Readership, Religion, Media, and Superhero Narratives: An Exploration of Transcendental Style and Meaning-Making Processes in Comic Books and Film

CHRISTINE ATCHISON

K1258686

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the PhD

Kingston University

August 2020

Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

My Lord Jesus, to whom I owe everything.

Will Brooker and Catherine O'Brien, for their unwavering support and patience and their invaluable knowledge and guidance.

Anna Froula, for being an unofficial mentor throughout my studies.

Tyler, for being my partner through it all.

Jen, for being the best friend, sounding board, and critical reader I could ever ask for.

The entire Scheers clan for believing in me and helping me overcome multiple obstacles.

My dad, for supporting this endeavour from the beginning.

Cinema Journal, for affording me the opportunity to gain valuable experience during my doctoral studies

Kingston School of Art, for being a welcoming faculty and for supporting my research.

Christopher Deacy and Simon Brown for taking the time to read and examine my thesis and provide excellent, kind, and constructive feedback.

Pelota, for being a constant and comforting furry companion.

Abstract

This thesis uses an innovative and interdisciplinary framework to investigate the factors that imbue a film or comic book with transcendent potential and is structured around three key research questions: 1) Can superhero narratives fulfil modified versions of traditional transcendental film frameworks? 2) Does a superhero narrative that subverts the very idea of superheroes and features characters not typically associated with mythic or religious figures still have transcendent potential? 3) Can the comic book's form be used in creative and innovative ways to enhance the transcendent potential of a superhero narrative? I use the work of André Bazin, Paul Schrader, and Christopher Deacy to demonstrate that existing frameworks for effective religious, transcendent, and redemptive films are too narrow to account for the lived experiences of some viewers. Using a methodology built on the work of hermeneuticists (like Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer), semioticians (like Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, and Roman Jakobson), and myth theorists (like Pascal Boyer and Joseph Campbell) I show that the transcendent potential of any given text resides both in the text itself and the intertextual and cultural background of those who encounter it. I combine this theoretical model with the work of comics theorists (like Thierry Groensteen, Scott McCloud, Drew Morton, Darby Orcutt, Douglas Rushkoff, and Ian Hague) to demonstrate that both superhero narratives and the comic book medium are inherently suited to expressing the transcendent. In order to test, and ultimately prove, my claims, I conduct case studies of three films (*Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016), *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009)) that are not typically associated with transcendental style and one comic book (*Watchmen* (Alan Moore and David Gibbons, 1986-1987)).

Table of Contents

Introduction

The study of religion and popular culture is gaining traction in the academic community, but there is still a tendency to dismiss the popular as the profane in opposition to the sacred.[1] Writing in 2007, Christopher Deacy claimed that the study of religion and film operates at the periphery of both film and religion scholarship (2007: 307). His claim (which is addressed more fully in the literature review section) was written just as religion and film scholarship was beginning to gain more traction, but it is important to note that—although the first three quarters of the twentieth century did not include a large volume of work dedicated to the study of film and religion—it did precipitate the birth of the discipline and the relatively wide distribution of some key texts.

Early examples of film and religion scholarship, which will be referenced throughout this thesis, include Herbert A Jump's 1910 'The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture' as well as André Bazin's prolific work in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s.[2] These seminal texts were followed by impactful work from Paul Schrader in 1972 (*Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer)*, Michael Bird in 1982 (*Religion in Film*), and Christopher Deacy in 1999 (*Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film*). Although these twentieth-century monographs and (in the case of Bazin) curated collections laid the groundwork for the field, the study of film and religion would not see rapid growth until the twenty-first century.

---

[1] Mircea Eliade is credited with articulating the difference between the sacred (that is, objects, places, things, and rituals connected to God or transcendence) and the profane (that is, things that are markedly separate from the sacred) as well as the elements, rules, rituals, and societal norms that inform and produce these differences (Eliade, 1987).

[2] Much of Bazin's work during this period was published posthumously in the 1958 first volume of *Que'est-ce que le cinema* and translated into English under the title *What is Cinema* in 1967.

One of the strongest indicators of the field's growth can be seen in the founding of the *Journal of Religion and Film* as well as the continued relevance, republishing, and repackaging of most of the early foundational works referenced above, many of which I use throughout this thesis. The 2004 second edition of Bazin's *What is Cinema* is currently available in hardcover, softcover, and as an e-book while excepts from both volume 1 and volume 2 have appeared in a multitude of other sources. Similarly, Paul Schrader's work on *Transcendental Style* was republished in 1988 and then again, this time with a new introduction, in 2018 and was promoted by Schrader at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival. Even work published in the twenty-first century has found a wide enough audience to warrant second editions. John Lyden's work on film as religion, for instance, was originally published in 2003 and re-released as a heavily revised second edition in 2019. The presence of edited collections dedicated to the study of religion and film from major publishers (such as Routledge's *Religion and Film Reader* [2007] and *The Continuum Companion of Religion and Film* [2009, now published by Bloomsbury and known as *The Bloomsbury Companion to Religion and Film*]) further attests to the field's increasing recognition within academia. This growth is also visible in the increased frequency of monographs and articles dedicated to the interdisciplinary relationship between film and religion—a trend that is addressed more fully in the literature review of this thesis. Suffice it to say for now that although the field may lag behind other, more established, disciplines it is clearly finding an audience, inspiring scholars, and growing.

As a part of this growth, I attempt to follow in the footsteps of the foundational theorists I referenced above as I continue to problematize the division between the sacred (religion) and profane (popular culture) by exploring non-traditional locations of religious themes and symbols. Specifically, my work here focuses on religion and superhero narratives found in film and comic

books. I argue that existing transcendental film theories cannot be applied to superhero films without modification due to the restrictive formal requirements of said styles. I then demonstrate that modified versions of these transcendental styles that privilege narrative and characters over formal requirements can be applied to superhero narratives with varying levels of success. Finally, I illustrate that the comic book form has the capability to heighten the transcendent potential of superhero narratives when the form is used in a creative and innovative manner.

Terms and Definitions[3]

Terms like 'religion', 'transcendence', 'sacred', 'profane', and even 'comics' have fluid and contested definitions. I do not intend to outline definitive definitions of these terms, but a brief analysis of some of their contested meanings and how I will be using them throughout this thesis is necessary at the outset. Russell McCutcheon's *Manufacturing Religion* (2003) successfully draws attention to the myth of *sui generis*, enclosed theories of religion. For McCutcheon, religion is not unique, does not operate as something inimitable, is partially invented, intricately tied to (often political) concerns, and cannot be separated from other aspects of culture (McCutcheon, 2003: 7). He contends that

> the category of religion is a conceptual tool and ought not to be confused with an ontological category actually existing in reality. In other words, our use of the scholarly category of religion is theoretically based, a model not to be confused with reality—whatever that may or may not be. (2003: vii)

McCutcheon is careful to specify that he is not claiming that people do not experience what they would categorize as religious experiences; he is simply levelling a critique at the seemingly

[3] Small portions of this section were originally published in *Religião, Mídia e Cultura* following a conference of the same title and reappear in this thesis with the conference organizer's and publisher's permission. See Atchison, 2015[b] for more information. I have also included a copy of the full article in Appendix D.

constructed category of religion that not only informs its practice and study, but may even control what is appropriate to study in conversation with religion and what is not.

McCutcheon recognizes the threat that his critique against *sui generis* conceptions of religion and notions of the sacred (that is, things that 'belong' in the realm of religion) and profane (that is, things that do not belong inside the realm of religion) presents to the field of religious studies, but does not necessarily see this as negative. For McCutcheon,

> although the critique of *sui generis* religion might hasten the death of the academic discipline variously known in English as religious studies, history of religions, and comparative religion, it might simultaneously open the way for a cross-disciplinary, decentred study of this intriguing aspect of human communities. (2003: 21)

It is this decentred study of religion and related phenomena that I am most interested in. I agree with McCutcheon's warning that methodologies based on *sui generis* conceptions of religion may fail 'to acknowledge the socially entrenched judgment of the researcher concerning what is and what is not religious—a judgment that remains unarticulated and therefore undefended because of the presumably self-evident authority of *sui generis* religion' (2003: 57). It is these pre-judgements that support popular notions of the sacred and the profane and hinder the full fruition of religion and popular culture studies.

Too often, simplified versions of Mircea Eliade's conception of the sacred and profane are internalized and used to create strict borders between intertwined aspects of reality. Kevin Lewis O'Neil proclaims that people, places, things, and spaces are not inherently sacred or profane, but must be made sacred or profane through ritual or a lack thereof, with this beautiful analogy: 'Inside the house it's dirt; outside, it's earth' (O'Neil, 2013: 1094). For O'Neil, the divide is 'arbitrary but immobile, imagined but impressionable—sacrality forged by profane hands divides the world into meaningful bits of terrain' (2013: 1097). One of the aims of this

thesis is to demonstrate that superhero narratives in film and comic books can operate as 'meaningful bits of terrain'.

O'Neil suggests that the only way to bring the earth inside is to dismantle the very ideologies that make it distinct from dirt:

> Re-spatializing American religion begins with a shift in method. A simple inversion will not do—it is not enough to argue that the profane can actually be sacred or that a particular place can be both sacred and profane at one and the same time. . . . The field needs fewer geographical divisions, not more. What must be done is to begin to question separation itself. (2013: 1101)

Unlike O'Neil, I submit that, for the moment at least, the flawed categories that differentiate the sacred from the profane are needed to speak about what is currently understood as something within the realm of religion and what is not in order to problematize and interrogate those divisions. That said, I fully agree that the arbitrary borders that separate these binaries need to be, at the very least, partially dismantled because they (like most binaries) do not adequately describe the world most people experience. The existence of transcendental film styles and frameworks aid in this dismantling, as they suggest that the experience of watching a film can potentially bear a sacred quality that can be experienced outside the divisions that traditionally separate what happens inside a recognized sacred space (like a church, temple, or mosque) and what happens inside a recognized secular space (a commercial movie theatre, for example). Before moving on to more specific examples of the blurred lines that separate the sacred from the profane I should note that, given the shifting and contested definitions of 'religion' and 'transcendent', I will be using them very broadly throughout the thesis. When I refer to religion I am generally referring to symbols, acts, beliefs, figures, and rituals connected to a specific religious movement, like Christianity.[4]

[4] Although this thesis is not written from a theological perspective—I am not attempting to put forward a specific understanding of what the divine is or what humanity's relationship to the divine is—there are theological elements

Interestingly, Clive Marsh argues that the experience of going to see a film at the cinema can bear a religiosity similar to attending a religious service at a church, temple, or mosque. Marsh begins his argument by questioning the 'secularization thesis' and pointing to how many people's 'burgeoning interest in "spirituality" [. . .] rides on the back of the apparent failure of religion (and Christianity in particular)' (Marsh, 2005: 5). Marsh not only suggests that an interest in spirituality points to religion's enduring presence and importance in Western society, he also claims that many 'secular' activities have under-recognized 'religious' elements. Although Marsh's work is film-centred he does note that he is 'not suggesting that film-watching has any *unique* claim to have replaced religion in Western culture. Sport, TV and education are but three other contenders (2005: 5). He is also careful to note that he is not only 'suggesting that cinema-going functions as an alternative to, or a replacement for, traditional religious activity' (Marsh, 2005: 6) through having external similarities 'i.e. as a regular binding commitment [that] brings the cinema-goer into a range of practices which structure life, provide relaxing space, and create a shared experience [. . .]' (Marsh, 2005: 3-4). He is also aiming to examine the ways in which cinema 'does not simply fill in the time left by the absence of religion, but actually enables film-watchers to participate in the business of religion' (Marsh, 2005: 6).

In order to conduct this analysis Marsh relies on the definition of religion espoused by John Hick. Hick's definition is a functional one that does not necessarily require religious adherents to believe in a theistic conception of God, but instead requires a religion to help its adherents gain a better understanding of the universe and their place in it by referencing either a God, gods, or—more broadly—a transcendent reality, process, or order of some sort (Marsh, 2005: 9). For Marsh, cinema accomplishes this goal by giving audiences an alternative space

---

scattered throughout, particularly when I analyse religious parallels and themes within superhero narratives and reviews that are written from a theological perspective.

(compared to traditional religious meeting places) 'to undergo experiences, reflect on what is happening to them, develop their identities, and decide how to live' (Marsh, 2005: 17) and conducts a variety of case studies to illustrate his point. Some of these case studies focus on a particular film (like *Titanic* [James Cameron, 1997] or *The Shawshank Redemption* [Frank Darabont, 1994]) while others focus on the collective work of a particular actor (like Robin Williams as a 'wounded healer' [Marsh, 2009: 43]) and others still focus on the collective work of particular directors, like the Coen Brothers. All of this to say that Marsh analyses a wide variety of films to illustrate his point: that filmgoing has external religious elements and can function in a way similar to religion for some viewers.

Many other religion and popular culture scholars have also identified religious elements in secular films and comic books. Some (like Michael Bird and Andrew Tripp) have reflected on the religious use of these media, others (like Adam McGee and Alison Smith) have reflected on the social commentary these media sometimes direct toward religion, while others still (like André Bazin, Paul Schrader, Christopher Deacy, John Lyden, and Christopher Knowles) have reflected on the potential religious functionality of these media. In the literature review I will provide summaries of key research in these categories and will conduct an overview of trends that have guided this type of scholarly inquiry. For now, suffice it to say that my own work follows in the footsteps of Bazin, Schrader, Deacy, Lyden, and Knowles. It spans across disciplines while remaining primarily located in film studies and religious studies and has led me to grapple with questions related to the nature of religion in secular spaces and medial limitations, abilities, and definitions as they relate to the study of superheroes and religion. I build on film theorists, like Schrader, who have outlined a possible 'transcendent' form of film to investigate whether there is space for superhero narratives within existing transcendental style

frameworks. I pay special attention to religious interpretations of superhero narratives across these media to try to understand how the intricacies of each medium might affect said interpretations.

Schrader recognizes the sometimes 'catch all' use of the term transcendent and takes the time to outline three common definitions: 1) 'The Transcendent, the Holy or Ideal itself' 2) 'the transcendental, human acts or artifacts which express something of the Transcendent, or what Mircea Eliade in his anthropological study of comparative religions calls "hierophanies"' and 3) 'transcendence, the human religious experience' (Schrader, 1988: 3). Greg Watkins sheds light on Schrader's use of the term 'transcendent' when he claims that the transcendent style of film espoused by Schrader allows film to express 'the holy itself' instead of illustrating 'holy feelings' (Watkins, 2009: 82). Watkins' conception of Schrader's use of the term 'transcendent'—one that I adopt—appears to combine all three definitions that Schrader outlines while privileging the definition that centres on hierophany—'human acts or artifacts which express something of the Transcendent [sic]' (Schrader, 1988: 3).

The term 'comic book', like religion, transcendence, sacred, and profane, is also contested. Debates exist regarding the differences between newspaper comic strips, comic books, trade paperbacks, graphic novels, and editorial comics. In *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels,* Ian Hague observes two broad categories of comics scholarship that combine to create an 'aesthetic and formal' approach to studying the medium: 1) the definitional project and 2) the mechanical project (Hague, 2014: 10-11). For Hague, the definitional project asks 'what is a comic?' while the mechanical project asks 'how do comics work?' (2014: 10-11). Although Hague counts himself among the theorists occupying the 'mechanical project' side of the comics studies coin, he still dedicates an entire chapter to

grappling with the definitional project (2014: 9-33). Like Hague, I am more concerned with the latter question than the former but unlike Hague, I will not be spending time delineating different definitions of comics because the types of narratives I analyse find themselves in comic books whose definition is generally uncontested.

That said, I will note that *Watchmen* (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, 1986/87)—the subject of my final case study—is sometimes called a graphic novel, comic series, and/or trade paperback. Graphic novels and trade paperbacks are generally understood to house long-form comics that require more pages than a single serialized comic book issue allows. Often graphic novels and trade paperbacks include a narrative that had been originally released as a series of single, serialized comic book issues. Sometimes a graphic novel will be specifically written to be a graphic novel and will not include material published serially beforehand. *Watchmen* is an example of a graphic novel that had been previously published as a serialized narrative over twelve single issues through DC Comics in 1986 and 1987. For the purposes of this thesis I will use the terms comics, and comic books, interchangeably to refer to superhero comics more generally. When referencing *Watchmen,* I will use graphic novel, trade paperback, comics, and comic book(s) interchangeably to reflect the variety of ways readers may have encountered the narrative in its comic book form.

Why Focus on Superhero Narratives and Religion?

The character similarities between some comic book characters, specifically superhero characters, and various deities are striking. Both Christopher Knowles and Greg Garrett pinpoint these parallels, but they are often so obvious that they hardly need to be pointed out to superhero fans with a theology or classics background. Take, for instance, Superman. His interactions with

the rest of the Justice League pantheon accord him a Zeus-like authority, while his choice to live as a mortal with super strength (which was initially his main power—his more fantastic abilities were not present from the outset of his creation) bring to mind Herculean parallels. Then there are the parallels his origin story shares with that of Moses—a desperate mother sends her son to the unknown in an effort to save him from certain annihilation—and of Jesus: an other-worldly, perhaps even heavenly, son comes to make earth his home while serving to continuously save and inspire its people.

Garrett and Knowles go beyond outlining the religious parallels that some superheroes share with mythic and religious figures and claim that superheroes have religious and mythic functions as well. Knowles suggests that fan practices that display devotion to their favourite superhero are similar to some worship practices in his 'Cult of the Superhero' theory (2007: 15) while Garrett suggests that superheroes have become part of a Western collective mythology (2008: 5). Each of their claims are overviewed in more detail in the literature review section of this thesis. Suffice it to say for now that the religious parallels that superheroes share with religious figures, as well as the claims (like those of Garrett and Knowles) that connect superheroes with religion on a functional level, suggest that the link between superheroes, religion, and the transcendent is a promising line of inquiry.

Bias[5]

Although I am not writing out of a theological context or for a predominantly Christian audience, there is a palpable Christian bias throughout this thesis. I include religious parallels between superhero narratives and religions outside of Christianity, but there is still a tendency to

[5] Small portions of this section were originally published in *Religião, Mídia e Cultura* following a conference of the same title and reappear in this thesis with the conference organizer's and publisher's permission.

speak about Christian parallels, themes, and symbols most often. The reason for this is twofold. First, 'Christianity has for centuries been the largest religion in the Western world, and is intimately bound up with the culture, the social fabric, the scholarship, the morality, and the levers of power in the West' (Fontana, 2003: vii). Second, as I have a Christian background that influences my own cultural and intertextual history, I more naturally recognize symbols that resonate with my background than those that originate outside of it.

I focus on parts of the West, specifically the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, for a number of reasons: first, focusing on predominantly English-speaking countries removes language barriers that I would otherwise encounter when conducting primary and secondary research. Second, the colonial and post-colonial history of the United Kingdom (which includes Canada and the United States as previous colonies) provides a rich ground for analysing the impact of cultural exchange in so-called secular meaning-making pursuits. Third, I am an advocate of research methodologies that balance both etic and emic approaches. My life experiences as a Canadian who is immersed in American culture, has travelled extensively in the United States, lives close to the US border, and who has lived and studied in a British environment have prepared me to study these environments while balancing both etic and emic perspectives. Fourth, and lastly, the 'superhero' narrative is a largely Western phenomenon and my case study examples, comic book superheroes, were birthed in a principally Western context.

The West is still predominantly Christian—all fifty-one countries and territories in the Americas and forty-six of the fifty countries and territories in Europe have a majority-Christian population (Pew, 2011: 19).[6] This, unsurprisingly, leads to predominantly Christian imagery in

[6] Please note that 'readers should bear in mind that the definition of Christian in this [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's] report is very broad. The intent is sociological rather than theological: We [the Pew Research Center and myself] are attempting to count groups and individuals who self-identify as Christian. This includes people who hold beliefs that may be viewed as unorthodox or heretical by other Christians. It also includes Christians who

Western media. That said, it is important to note that the 'Regional Distribution of Christians' is changing. This change is often mistakenly identified as secularism or the death of religion. It is, in some cases, the death of religious institutions and institutional affiliation, but new forms of spirituality abound and can be found in unlikely places, like—as Christopher Knowles and Grant Morrison argue—in the pages of a comic book (Knowles, 2007 and Morrison, 2012). In 1910, 66.3 percent of Christians resided in Europe, 27.1 percent in the Americas, 4.5 percent in the Asia-Pacific region, 1.4 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 0.7 percent in the Middle East and North Africa (Pew, 2011: 9). As of 2010, those numbers have changed drastically: 36.8 percent of the world's Christians reside in the Americas, 25.9% in Europe, 23.6% in Sub-Saharan Africa, 13.1% in Asia Pacific, and 0.6% in the Middle East and North Africa (Pew, 2011: 9). Interestingly, 'Christians make up about the same portion of the world's population today (32 percent) as they did a century ago (35 percent)' (Pew, 2011: 9). They have not disappeared, but the distribution of Christians has radically shifted from the Global North to the Global South (Pew, 2011: 13).[7] Relatedly, the Christian percentage of the population of traditionally Christian regions has decreased: 95.9 percent of the Americas' population was Christian in 1910 whereas that number dropped to 86 percent in 2010. Similarly, 94.5 percent of Europe's population was Christian in 1910 whereas 76.2 percent of Europe's population identified as Christian in 2010 (Pew, 2011: 15).

Citing similar statistics regarding each of the world's 'major' religious traditions is beyond the scope of this introduction. That said, the shifts in both global and national religious landscapes in the Americas and Europe mean that their social milieu has changed and is

seldom pray or go to church' (Pew, 2011: 7).

[7] In 2017 Pew released updated research that demonstrated that between 2010 and 2015 the global Christian population decreased from 32 percent to 31.2 percent (Hackett and McClendon, 2017).

continuing to change. The immigration and emigration of people also influences the immigration and emigration of cultural goods, stories, and practices, but Christianity is still an integral part of a Western cultural milieu. All of this demonstrates that no part of culture exists in a vacuum where it is immune from other parts of culture. Popular culture, like the society it is written out of and interpreted within, is not immune to the influence of religion. This means that escaping a Western, Christian bias while writing out of a Western, Christian context and analysing texts from the same context is nearly impossible.

Outline

This thesis unfolds in six main parts: a literature review section followed by a methodology section and four case studies. The literature review section provides a relatively brief synopsis of previous research focused on religion, comics, and film in order to demonstrate the close relationship that ties the disciplines of film studies, comic studies, and religious studies together. The research that is analysed in the literature review section is organized into four categories (using religion to interpret or comment on films and comic books; using films and comic books to interpret or comment on religion; the religious use of films and comic books; film and comic books as religion). After demonstrating the latter two categories as the richest for further exploration, the focus of the literature review shifts to illustrate why existing transcendental styles and frameworks can, and ought to be, modified and applied to superhero narratives on film and in comic books.

The interdisciplinary nature of this study requires an interdisciplinary methodology. As such, the theories and methods used are appropriated from religious studies, film studies, fan studies, semiotics, and media studies to address the parts of my research that are related to each

of these respective fields. The methodology section is centred around religious interpretive hermeneutic frameworks, existing transcendental styles of film, the formal qualities of films and comic books, and the role of intertextuality in meaning making. The chapter is especially focused on the unique ways that both comic books and films encourage viewers and readers to take on co-creative roles as active consumers. It links these co-creative roles to why films and comic books are so often identified with religion. The section begins with a detailed overview of Bazin's transcendent film framework, Schrader's transcendental style of film, and Deacy's work on film and redemption in order to demonstrate why each theorist's work cannot be applied to superhero narratives on film or in comic books without significant modification. The chapter then introduces the important role of audience members and readers in any interpretive pursuit through the work of hermeneuticists (like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur), theorists who direct their attention to the nature of authorship (like Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes), and semioticians (like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce). The section then shifts focus to evaluate the role of intertextuality in hermeneutics, authorship and auteur theories, and semiotics to demonstrate how intertextuality operates as a binding glue that holds my work together. Finally, the chapter uses the work of comics theorists (like Greg Garrett, Christopher Knowles, Drew Morton, Douglas Rushkoff, Evan Thomas, Darby Orcutt, Ian Hague, and Scott McCloud) to demonstrate why superheroes may operate as a seat of transcendent potential that can be enhanced by the comic book form.

Following the methodology section, I use two case studies to address my first research question—can superhero narratives fulfil modified versions of traditional transcendental frameworks? To investigate this question I apply the frameworks and styles of Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy to *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) and *Batman v*

Superman: Dawn of Justice (Zack Snyder, 2014) to demonstrate that each framework can be applied to superhero narratives with varying levels of success. In short, using film reviews coupled with my own analysis as support, I conclude that although superhero narratives have transcendent potential, the style in which the films are presented to an audience will help determine the extent to which the film's transcendent potential is realised.

I chose *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* as my first two case studies for three key reasons. First, I did not want to limit my analysis to either DC, Marvel, or a single director or screenwriter's repertoire. Second, I chose to limit my analysis to films that enjoyed wide distribution and box office, if not necessarily, critical success. This decision was made in order to highlight the appeal of superhero films and in order to suggest that popular, effects-laden movies that currently lay outside most transcendental frameworks and theories may still carry transcendent potential. Third, I wanted to include an analysis of foundational texts that helped build the current cinematic universes that have defined many late-2010 superhero film box office successes.

Captain America: The First Avenger, for instance, led the box office during its summer debut and falls in the middle of 'Phase One' of Marvel's attempt to create a unique cinematic universe (Dixon and Graham, 2017: 41-42). It is preceded by *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), and *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), and was immediately followed by *Marvel's: The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012). Of all of Marvel's 'Phase One' offerings I chose *Captain America*: *First Avenger* due to its very clear role as an immediate lead-in to the formation of The Avengers (this role is made especially clear in the final credits cutscene, which teased the formation of The Avengers). 'Phase Two' of the Marvel Cinematic Universe focuses on stories that take 'place in a post-

Avenger's world' (Dixon and Graham, 2017: 42) and includes many other films that are promising avenues for future research, not least because of their much more diverse cast, settings, and storylines.

Though DC's success during Marvel's 'Phase One' period was predominantly defined by films that focused on singular characters and did not suggest a larger interconnected universe, it did not take long for the comics giant to mimic its rival and begin releasing individual origin films set in a shared universe that ultimately culminated in 2017's *Justice League* (Zach Snyder and Joss Whedon). While Zach Snyder's 2013's *Man of Steel* preceded *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* I have chosen to focus on the latter film because of its more direct link to DCs attempt at its own cinematic universe—the film has Ben Affleck's Batman and Henry Cavill's Superman ultimately team up with Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman and teases the future recruitment of Aquaman (played by Jason Mamoa), The Flash (played by Ezra Miller), and Cyborg (played by Ray Fischer). Interestingly, despite polarizing reviews (which will be analysed in the case study) *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* performed quite well and earned more than a billion dollars in box office receipts (Dixon and Graham, 2017: 27).

The third case study seeks to address my second research question: does a superhero narrative that subverts the very idea of superheroes and features characters not typically associated with mythic or religious figures still have transcendent potential? In order to address this question I put the work of myth theorists Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler, and Pascal Boyer in conversation with the work of Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy and fan reviews to demonstrate that Zack Snyder's 2009 film version of *Watchmen* does have transcendent potential, while also arguing that the film's transcendent potential is limited by the factors that prevent it from fulfilling Bazin's and Schrader's models.

While the choice of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice, Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *Watchmen* are suitable for the aims of this thesis, they do demonstrate a notable lack of diversity. Since these films were produced the genre has moved on in a promising new inclusive direction that has seen both DC's and Marvel's cinematic universes include standalone films wholly focused on strong and well-written male and female characters from racially diverse backgrounds. Patty Jenkin's *Wonder Woman* (2017), Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's *Captain Marvel* (2019) and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) are a few standout examples of this trend. Although these films are beyond the scope of this thesis, it is my hope that they (and other films that follow in their footsteps) will be the subject of my own future research and that of other scholars.

The fourth and final case study addresses my final research question: can the comic book's form be used in creative and innovative ways to enhance the transcendent potential of a superhero narrative? While intertextuality, semiotics, hermeneutics, authorship theories, and comics theories impact and guide the prior three case studies, they become the central pillar in my analysis of Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*. Using the work of comics theorists in conversation with hermeneuticists, semioticians, and intertextuality theorists, this chapter demonstrates that the formal elements of the comic book (as they are used by Moore and Gibbons) increases the co-creative role the reader takes on as they encounter the text. This, in turn, increases the importance of the intertextual and cultural background of the reader, which moves the seat of transcendent potential from specific formal and narrative qualities to the space where the reader encounters these qualities as an active co-creator of the narrative.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1: Introduction

Superheroes—the crown jewel of mainstream comic book industries—are becoming increasingly ubiquitous popular culture icons. While Hollywood (and other major film industries across the world) appropriate these characters for the usual annual round of blockbuster movies, the public is also treated to live performances featuring these same heroes on both Broadway and smaller independent stages.[8] The increased presence of superheroes across many types of media has led, perhaps unsurprisingly, to their arrival in lecture theatres across North America and Europe. Scholars specializing in primary disciplines ranging from biochemistry to philosophy are helping carry superhero studies from the fringes of scholarship towards its centre.

The increased academic attention paid to superheroes—and other types of characters who frequent comic book pages—has led to the burgeoning field of comic studies. My work here straddles the border between comic studies and film studies and is focused on the relationship between superhero narratives and religion in both types of media. The sheer number of successful cross-media iterations of these characters means that any analysis of superhero narratives in film and comic books must be interdisciplinary at its core and pay special attention to the relationship between the two media.

Although scholarly material on comic studies within academia has been available for decades, the field still lags behind film studies in both prestige and volume.[9] That said, English-

[8] *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2011 – 2014) written by Julie Taymor, Glen Berger, and Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa brings the story of Peter Parker and his double life to Broadway while those who prefer off Broadway shows could have treated themselves to the touring stage show *Batman Live* (Nick Grace, 2011) or they could have seen the parodic musical *Holy Musical Batm@n* (Nick Gage and Scott Lamps, 2012) based, of course, on the Dark Knight and Boy Wonder.

[9] Umberto Eco's 1972 article 'The Myth of Superman' is one potential beginning of the academic study of comic books. Prior to Eco, professionals, like Frederick Wertham, directed their attention to the comic book medium but

language scholarly work focusing on comics and superheroes has increased exponentially throughout the last three decades. 1999 proved to be a particularly seminal year for comic book and superhero scholarship: Pascal Lefèvre published an English version of 'Recovering Sensuality in Comic Theory' in the inaugural issue of the *International Journal of Comic Art* while Thierry Groensteen published his famous *The System of Comics*.[10] Since 1999 the comic book world has been treated to dozens of scholarly monographs along with some key edited collections.[11] Though the field has recently ballooned and is beginning to gain more traction in the academic community there is still a lack of available scholarship—especially edited collections. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's *A Comic Studies Reader* (2009) is an excellent

---

did so only to draw attention to, or defend the comic book medium from, the social ills for which many believed it was responsible.

[10] Originally published as *Système de la bande dessinée* through Presses Universitaires de France in 1999. An English translation was published through the University of Mississippi Press in 2007.

[11] Notable monographs include (but are not limited to): Martin Barker's *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics* (1989); Will Brooker's *Batman Unmasked* (2000); Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001); Brian Wright's *Comic Book Nation* (2003); Mario Saraceni's *The Language of Comics* (2003); Greg Garrett's *Holy Superheroes! Revised and Expanded Edition* (2008); Randy Duncan, Matthew J. Smith, and Paul Levitz' *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture* (2nd Edition) (2009); Jean-Paul Gabilliet's *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books* (translated by Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen) (2009); Jeffrey J. Kripal's *Mutants and Mystics* (2011); Charles Hatfield's *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (2011); Adilifu Nama's *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (2011); Will Brooker's *Hunting the Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman* (2012); Thierry Groensteen's *Comics and Narration* (translated by Ann Miller) (2013); Noah Berlatsky's *Wonder Woman* (2015); Liam Burke's *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* (2015); John A. Lent's *Asian Comics* (2015); Bart Beaty's *Twelve-Cent Archie* (2015); Paul Young's *Frank Miller's Daredevil and the Ends of Heroism* (2016); Maaheen Ahmed's *Openness of Comics: Generating Meaning within Flexible Structures* (2016); Blair Davis's *Movie Comics: Page to Screen/Screen to Page* (2017); Ian Gordon's *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (2017); Ian Gordon's *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture* (1998); Andrew Hoberek's *Considering Watchmen: Poetics, Property, Politics* (2014); Bart Beaty and Benjamin Woo's *The Greatest Comic Book of All Time* (2016); Noah Berlatsky's *Wonder Woman: Bondage and Feminism in the Marston/Peter Comics, 1941-1948* (2015); Bart Beaty's *Twelve Cent Archie* (2015); Philip Bevin's *Superman and Comic Book Brand Continuity* (2018); and M Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* (2017). Unfortunately, there are not many edited collections and anthologies dedicated to comic book scholarship. That said, there are some key texts that are valuable contributions to the field—see, for example: Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium* (2004); Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester's *A Comics Studies Reader* (2009); A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer's *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (2010); Frederick Luis Aldama's *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle* (2010); Aaron Meskin and Roy T. Cook's *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach* (2012); Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted's *Comics and the U.S. South* (2013); Frances Gateward and John Jennings's *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art* (2015); and Assaf Gamzou and Ken Koltun-Fromm's *Comics and Sacred Texts: Reimagining Religion and Graphic Narratives*. Though the above monographs and edited collections are excellent examples of comic book scholarship, many of them are outside the specific scope of this thesis and are not used in a direct manner.

example of the growing trend of emerging scholarship in the field. One review hails *A Comic Studies Reader* 'as a practical introduction to comics and the formal study surrounding them. Drawing on some of the best resources that are so far available, [Heer] and Worcester have set an example of what broad-based comics studies can be and, in essence, have laid down a challenge to future scholars of graphic narrative' (Royal, 2012: 203). In many ways, *A Comic Studies Reader* accomplishes what an introductory reader should accomplish. It contains a vast array of thematically organized, well-written scholarship focusing on various elements of the comic book. Notably, it does not include substantial discussion on the topic of religion.

The assortment of academic examinations of comic books in *A Comic Studies Reader* cannot be expected to include every possible interest, but the absence of a focus on religion and comic books is telling. This absence could point to a lack of available scholarly material, a need for better quality scholarly material, or, more broadly, it could reflect a lack of interest in and focus on religion and comic books in general. The Comics Research Bibliography seems to suggest that all three issues are at play. Although the Comics Research Bibliography website has not seen a major update since November of 2009, it includes nearly thirty thousand entries. A 'religion' keyword search of those entries produces a list of a mere 103 sources.[12] Although more sources have certainly been published since 2009, the need for more research in the area of comics and religion is palpable.

The lack of academic attention paid to religion and comics does not appear to be an isolated phenomenon. Indeed, some scholars suggest the same problem plagues scholarship surrounding another medium in which superhero narratives are increasingly found, namely film.

[12] The Comics Research Bibliography is now static but is still accessible here: http://homepages.rpi.edu/~bulloj/comxbib.html.

Christopher Deacy, a prominent religion and film theorist, addresses his field's struggle to earn the attention and academic inquiry it deserves; he claims that, despite the presence of 'a substantial amount of empirical evidence to demonstrate that a religious reading of film should be at the cutting edge, rather than on the periphery, of contemporary scholarly activity,' scholarship related to religion 'has been comprehensively overlooked—if not, indeed, shunned—by many commentators, critics and academics' (2007: 307). Though there has been an increased interest in the connections between religion and film since Deacy's 2007 claim, I share his surprise at the seemingly peripheral placement of religion and film scholarship in both film studies and religious studies. That said, the situation does not seem nearly as dire as the plight of religion and comics studies. Take, for instance, Berkeley Library's religion and film bibliography: it has not been updated since 2011, but still includes over four hundred entries.[13] The mere existence of the *Journal of Religion & Film*, which at writing includes twenty-four volumes of scholarship, points to an interest in the intersection of religion and film while functioning as fertile ground on which more scholarship can grow. Although there have been far fewer inquiries into the relationship between comics and religion, this trend is changing and this thesis is a part of that change. The *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (established in 2002) has proven to be a home for scholarship on both film and religion as well as comics and religion, which is evidence of the growing interest in both fields.

I am not suggesting that having over four hundred pieces of scholarship and a dedicated journal moves a subject from the periphery to the centre of its academic inquiry. I acknowledge that—over a decade later—Deacy's observations are still a pointed reminder of the need for

[13] This bibliography (entitled "Religion and Myth in the Movies: A Bibliography of Books and Articles in the UC Berkeley Libraries") is also static but accessible at the following link: http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/religionbib.html.

continued interest in and exploration of religion and film in particular, and religion and popular culture more broadly. That said, the growing number of scholars who are addressing religion and film, and now, even comic books, are an encouraging sign of a change in the academic tide.

The following literature review will highlight the importance, strengths, and weaknesses of some existing work while drawing attention to the need for new scholarship that explores the relationship between religion and superhero narratives in both film and comic books. Although the focus of my research is superhero narratives, I also evaluate and use texts that address overarching connections between comic books and/or film and religion in order to explore the relationship each medium has with religion more generally. I do this to lay a foundation that prepares us to explore how superhero narratives affect these relationships.

Unlike the dynamic between religion and comic books, the connection between film and religion has been visited comparatively frequently by academics working out of various disciplines, with a multitude of goals and approaches. Scholars like William Blizek, Michelle Marie Desmarais, S. Brent Plate, and Jolyon Mitchell have attempted to organize current film and religion scholarship into clear categories. Even though the work of Mitchell, Plate, Desmarais, and Blizek is film-centred, aspects of it can be appropriated to investigate the relationship between comic books and religion as well.[14] To the best of my knowledge, similarly thorough and accessible categorical scholarship focused on comic books and religion has not been published. Because of this, and because my work focuses on both comic books and film, I will be using and adapting the categories identified by the above scholars throughout this

[14] At this point, it is important to note that I am not attempting to claim that the work of religion and film theorists can be lifted wholesale and applied to comic studies. Both comic book and film media are distinct and require different methods of inquiry. That said, because of the amount of academic study focused on religion and film and the transmedia appearance of comic book narratives and characters, I maintain that aspects of the study of religion and film can be modified and appropriated in limited ways to the study of comic books.

literature review.

In 'Religion and Film Studies through the *Journal of Religion and Film*' Blizek and Desmarais suggest that work on film and religion can be placed into one of four main categories: 1) using religion to interpret film, 2) using film to interpret religion, 3) the religious use of film, and 4) the cultural studies approach. The first three categories Blizek and Desmarais identify are self-explanatory (2011: 476-81) and categories one and two are recognized elsewhere by Mitchell and Plate as the two most popular ways of approaching film and religion scholarship (2007[a]: 3). We can analyse film (or comic books) looking for religious themes and find ourselves in category one. Conversely, we can analyse film (or comic books) paying special attention to the way a film or comic book portrays or comments on religion, and find ourselves in category two. Or, of course, a person of faith can view film (and comic books) through a theological lens (looking for ways to grow in faith), and find themselves in category three. It is also possible for a person who is not spiritual to look at a film through a religious lens and find a religious perspective in the film—thus also finding themselves in category three.[15] Even though Blizek and Desmarais treat the cultural studies approach as a distinct method of addressing the relationship between religion and film it can, depending on how religion is defined in relation to culture, serve as a catch-all category.

The usefulness of this category, because of the loosely defined relationship between culture and religion, is problematic and will be explored in more detail immediately below. The relationship between religion and culture is a question that has bred much debate in various

[15] It is important to note a distinction between looking at something from a theological perspective and a religious one. Theological perspectives necessarily assume some sort of religious or spiritual belief while a religious perspective does not. That said, in both popular discourse and scholarship (including this dissertation and the sources that inform it) some overlap between theological and religious perspectives is common and possibly unavoidable.

scholarly communities: that religion and culture are somehow related is often assumed; disagreements do not usually arise until the nature of that relationship is explored. This is because some scholars treat religion and culture as distinct while others treat the two as synonyms. For the purposes of this research I will follow in the footsteps of Catherine Albanese, Mark Hulsether, John Lyden, and John Hinnells—who all suggest that the terms 'religion' and 'culture' are intimately related.

Albanese, for instance, argues that 'religion' and 'culture' can be considered synonymous (qtd in Hulsether, 2005: 500). Hulsether, however, suggests that 'we can approach religions as subsets of culture that often seek to ground cultural claims, deepen their resonance, or test their limits'; that said, he does not wholly disagree with Albanese as he admits that 'religious subsets of culture may overlap extensively with the umbrella category [culture], sometimes to a point where for practical purposes they coincide' (Hulsether, 2005: 500). John Hinnells, like Hulsether and Albanese, recognises the practical overlap of popular conceptions of religion and culture when he observes that it is often 'not clear whether someone is discriminated against for being, say, from Pakistan or because of prejudice against Islam, and either can be the excuse for violence' (Hinnells, 2005: 9).

John Lyden—a prominent film and religion scholar—closely connects culture and religion to justify studying the linkages between popular culture (with a special emphasis on film) and religion. Lyden leans on Clifford Geertz's well-known conception of religion as something that does not necessarily include a theistic god but does always involve three aspects (myths, morals, and rituals) (Lyden, 2016; Lyden, 2019). For Lyden, religion is a functional way through which humanity determines worldviews (myths and meanings), moralities, and practices (rituals) while culture consists of 'the forms in which a society expresses its identity, values, and

beliefs about what has meaning' (2016: 7:38). Using this functional definition of religion, Lyden then goes on to investigate if each aspect of 'Geertz's definition [can] be found in the religion of film' (2019: 24).

Lyden begins by addressing the ritual elements of both religion and film and argues that although 'more ethnographic study needs to be done on the way films are experienced' there is a clear 'communal nature of film viewing' which links its ritual aspects to religion (2019: 27). He leans on the work of Catherine Bell to outline six general 'characteristics of ritual that are reproduced to some extent in secular activities: formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance' that film successfully mimics to varying degrees (Lyden, 2019: 87).[16] Lyden then claims that although films 'can be taken as illusions in one sense' they, like religion, ultimately 'have the force of reality by presenting a vision of how the world is as well as how it might be' before ultimately claiming that '[i]n the ritual context of viewing a film, we "entertain" the truth of its mythology and ethos as a subject of consciousness even as it "entertains" us' (Lyden, 2019: 36). So then, Lyden grants film a greater entertainment value than many religious rituals without diminishing its ritual importance and while highlighting its mythic elements.

It is important to note that while Lyden maintains that film holds a mythic quality he resists theories of myth, like those of Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and Mircea Eliade, that treat it in a reductionist manner (2019: 43-49). Interestingly, after analysing film's mythic function in light of the frameworks espoused by Campbell, Jung, and Eliade, Lyden ultimately concludes that 'myths exist as particular strategies for dealing with particular situations, and so there is no

[16] I, unlike Lyden, am not arguing that film functions as religion. Because of this, a full analysis of the way film-going fulfills Bell's six characteristics of ritual is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Suffice it to say for now that Lyden convincingly argues that film has ritual aspects that forge a kinship with religion and lend the medium religious-like functional qualities in some circumstances.

single form for all myths (e.g. Campbell's "monomyth" or Eliade's cosmogony) nor a pure myth that exists apart from the social context in which it is lived' (2019: 49) before going on to demonstrate how film can act as a tool to help audiences form strategies to deal with a wide variety of situations depending on the content of a specific movie.[17]

After establishing the ritual and mythic elements of film and religion, Lyden moves on to address the moral aspect of film as it relates to traditional religion. He begins by admitting that this is an area where popular culture's likeness to religion suffers the most before quickly defending the moral elements of popular culture and the fan communities that can be built around the mediums that form it:

> There seems no reason to dismiss the religion of popular culture out of hand because it is alleged without evidence to lack morality, commitment, or community, though these judgments are common. As modern fandoms develop and the study of them increases, more scholars (including myself) have taken them seriously as expressing coherent worldviews and values (Lyden, 2019: 55).

Following this defence, Lyden uses common film tropes (such as the tendency for good to prevail over evil in many films) to conclude that 'there is certainly no reason to propose that films lack a moral vision, for while we may not always find the morality of films to be profound or deep, there are clear moral norms that are upheld in most popular films' (2019: 59).

After establishing the ritual, mythic, and moral qualities of film, Lyden connects the medium's religious functions to the secularization thesis. Lyden, like myself, suggests that the conclusion that proponents of secularization champion (namely that religion and religiosity is declining in the West) is flawed:

Advocates of the secularization thesis initially held that 'religion' was losing its

[17] While I do not deny the universal, and therefore reductionist, qualities of the work of Jung, Campbell, and Eliade, I still find their theories useful. Although the work of these theorists cannot possibly hope to encompass the myths found in all cultures, they do adequately point to some culturally and historically located qualities that can lend a similarly culturally and historically located mythic functionality to certain stories. As such I will be using the work of both Campbell and Eliade further on in this dissertation.

> power in Western society, being replaced by the 'secular' as the central determiner of cultural norms and values. But increasingly, it has become apparent that traditional religion is not dying out [. . .]. The process that has been called secularization is not really the eclipse of traditional religion so much as the evolution of more religious alternatives (Lyden, 2019: 90).

Earlier in this dissertation I argued something similar to Lyden when I claimed that statistics suggest that the global distribution of religions was changing rather than declining. While I limited my analysis to traditional religious movements, Lyden includes film as one of the many 'religious alternatives' that is attracting new adherents in the wake of an apparent shift in Western religiosity: 'If secularization represents religious pluralism and the "secular" alternatives to traditional religion are simply new religions that compete with the old, then it may make sense to view secular culture [including, but not limited to film] as itself religious rather than nonreligious' (Lyden, 2019: 91). So, for Lyden, film (as a part of culture) shares a kinship with religion (through the process of determining and expressing meaning, values, and beliefs) that allows it to function as religion (2016: 7:38). Like Hinnells, I recognize the popular synonymous usage of religion and culture, but, in common with Hulsether, I do not necessarily align myself with either Albanese's claim that the two are synonymous or with Lyden's claim that film, as a part of culture, has a general religious function.

Blizek and Desmarais also consider the relationship between religion and culture. They mirror Hulsether's observation when they state that 'although religion is one element of culture, it is a very important part of culture and, in some cases, it is almost impossible to distinguish between religion and culture' (2011: 481). Following this observation, their use of cultural studies as a separate approach to religion and film is problematic. Cordoning off a 'cultural studies' approach as a separate and contained way to look at religion and film suggests, in some ways, that religion and culture should be seen as two distinct phenomenon that only overlap

some of the time. If religion and culture are as intimately related as Blizek and Desmarais seem to suggest, then any study of religion and film would almost always incorporate some aspects of cultural studies. It is for this reason that I abandon the 'cultural studies approach' in favour of a more distinct category: namely Lyden's 'film as religion' approach, which explores the possible religious function of film in society (2007: 416-426).

Since my thesis focuses on superhero narratives across films and comic books, both media need to be addressed. Although there is currently no adequate categorical study of comic book and religion scholarship to draw from, the categories overviewed above can easily—and usefully—be applied to religion and narratives across a variety of media. Consequently, I will be using the same categories for my study of the relationship between films, comic books, and religion.

So then, the remainder of this literature review will consist of an overview of film and comic book scholarship that will be divided into four categories: 1) using religion to interpret films and comic books, 2) using films and comic books to interpret and/or comment on religion, 3) the religious use of films and comic books, and 4) arguing that films and comic books can sometimes function as religion. These categories overlap at times and are not all encompassing, but they do provide a workable thematic division of scholarship related to comic books, films, and religion. It is also important to note that although many of these articles do not specifically focus on superhero narratives, the general approaches to studying religion in comic books and films that they outline are applicable to studying the intersection between religion and superhero narratives on film and in comic books.

Using Religion to Interpret or Comment on Film and Comic Books

This first approach is most common among theologians, religious studies scholars, and religious adherents and can sometimes overlap with the third (the religious use of film and comic books) and fourth (arguing that film and comic books can function in a way that is analogous to religion) categories.[18] Scholars who operate within this category are most interested in finding religious themes, imagery, and parallels in popular culture (Blizek and Desmarais, 2011: 476). A common criticism of this approach 'is that you can find something religious in virtually every movie [or comic book] made' (Blizek and Desmarais, 2011: 478) and that 'simply finding some religious symbol or theme does not seem to yield interesting results' (Blizek and Desmarais, 2011: 478). This criticism seems to be a narrow one that does not take audience studies into account. Deacy, focusing on film, answers this common criticism when he proposes that

> if a 'secular' filmmaker creates a film which is perceived by some audiences to be redolent in theological significance, then, irrespective of the degree to which such an interpretation is alien to that filmmaker's aims and intentions, the efficacy and integrity of that testimony must not be disregarded. (2007: 308)

It may be true that it is possible to find something religious in most texts, but the fact that audiences are able to make meanings that are contrary to the so-called authorial intention of any given text is integral to the rest of this thesis and speaks to the active—even authorial—role audiences inhabit when they interact with a text: 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination [. . .] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977: 148). Furthermore, focusing on the role of audiences in interpretation adds an extra layer of inquiry to scholarship that might otherwise have a singular textual focus. There is a wealth of scholarship across popular culture studies that attests to the active roles that audience members

[18] For the purposes of this thesis 'theology' is used to refer to perspectives written from within a specific faith background whereas 'religious studies' is used to refer to the study of religion and its associated ritual, cultural, social, and historical elements more generally.

inhabit.[19] Though an overview of audience studies is beyond the scope of this chapter, its significance will resurface throughout this dissertation—particularly in the methodology section. For now, suffice it to say that a large portion of scholars who study film, comic books, and religion recognize the importance of audience studies and seem to share Deacy's view on the significance of audience members' religious interpretations of texts.

Andrew Tripp is one such scholar. His article, 'Killing the Graven God: Visual Representations of the Divine in Comics' (2010), begins with a number of theological reflections on the importance of images of God, claiming that 'images of God define God as much as words name God' (2010: 108). Tripp then goes on to analyse how various comic book series (*Spawn* (Image Comics, 1992 – present), *Swamp Thing* (DC Comics, 1972-2016 (intermittent)), and *Preacher* (Vertigo, 1995 – 2000)) represent God visually. It is important to note that Tripp is not arguing that every comic book reader will pick up on the representations of God that he identifies. That said, his recognition of how non-religious, superhero comic books can include representations of God that are recognizable for some readers points toward the possibility of religious or spiritual interpretations that are open to those readers who are able to recognize the possibly unintentional visual and/or narrative cues.

A. David Lewis follows the same pattern as Tripp in 'Superman Graveside: Superhero Salvation beyond Jesus' (2010). Like Tripp's work, Lewis's article does not lack in clarity or determination. He accomplishes his goal: to analyse Superman's role as a token Christ figure. He goes beyond the typical Judeo-Christian analysis of Superman when he outlines other religious salvific interpretations that can be easily applied to the character. Writers like Grant Morrison

[19] Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn's *The Audience Studies Reader* gives an excellent snapshot of how questions of interpretation, reception, and interactivity have shifted over time and includes essays from the likes of Martin Barker, John Fiske, and Henry Jenkins.

and Christopher Knowles accomplish similar goals in their own books (*SuperGods* (2012) and *Our Gods Wear Spandex* (2007)), but Lewis does so in a succinct manner while grounding his analysis in theological and religious studies theories. Though he provides overviews of religious parallels, Lewis is not content with such a straightforward and potentially narrow analysis. When analysing Superman's role as a messianic saviour figure Lewis uses Christology to demonstrate how Superman's similarities with Christ are limited. For Lewis, 'Superman is a savior, but in a manner decoupled from Christology [and, as a result, Christianity]' (Lewis, 2010: 173). One of the most valuable features of Lewis's analysis is its pluralistic approach to religious interpretations of Superman: he does not allow Christians to claim Superman as their own and identifies parallels between the Man of Steel and Christ, Moses, Samson, and a slew of Greco-Roman mythological figures. By examining the multiple religious readings of Superman, Lewis brings light to the symbolic richness of the character and the role of the reader's religious literacy when it comes to religious interpretations of him. This is particularly relevant to my dissertation, as most superhero characters share the symbolic richness that Superman enjoys. As such, any study that connects religion to superhero narratives must account for how their incredibly rich symbolic potential can play a role in religious readings on the part of film viewers and comic book readers.

Michael Bird, writing about religion in film as a category, diverges from the theorists and critics that have been overviewed in this category in two key ways. First, he focuses on film instead of comic books. Second, unlike Morrison, Knowles, Tripp, and Lewis—all of whom focus on religious readings of particular comic book superhero characters and narratives—Bird grounds himself almost exclusively in film theory that is focused on the medium itself instead of the stories it holds. Bird utilises Eliade's concept of *hierophany,* which is used 'to designate the

act of manifestation of the sacred' in the profane (that is, the secular or non-religious) (2007: 391), to evaluate how film itself (and, perhaps by extension, other types of popular culture and visual media) can act as sites of *hierophany*—where one reality manifests itself or is transformed into another reality—as well. Bird essentially argues that film can communicate 'the paradoxical nature of reality' central to *hierophany* through the way that film, like *hierophany*, 'discloses not only itself but also another dimension underlying it' (2007: 391). For Bird, any object that manifests the sacred becomes something else—something sacred—while remaining itself—something secular (2007: 391). Bird applies this criterion to film and leans on the work of Amédée Ayfre (one of André Bazin's disciples) to outline a religious approach to cinema where the cinematic recording of reality 'does not exhaust reality, but rather evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery […] [it] deliver[s] something other than itself [something sacred], but by no means other than itself' (Bird, 2007: 393). Bird's work does not address comic books or superheroes in any way, but the foundation he lays for a specifically religious type of film is valuable for developing a transcendent theory of film that addresses superhero narratives and can be modified to develop a possible transcendent comic book theory as well. In some respects Bird's work could fit into the 'film and comic books as religion' category, but, because the concept of *hierophany* as applied to film treats the film as a secular object that manifests (or represents) the sacred while still remaining film, his work is most appropriately placed within this group. Arguably André Bazin's work on the possible transcendent function of film could also fit in this category, but I find it is a better fit in the fourth and final category.

Using Film and Comic Books to Interpret or Comment on Religion

Unlike the scholarship addressed above, authors who work out of this framework are less

interested in finding religious parallels and more interested in the way these parallels, themes, and images present and comment on religion. This approach answers questions like:

> Does a movie [or comic book] misrepresent my religion? Does a movie [or comic book] help people understand my religion? Does a movie [or comic book] show that religion oppresses women? Does a movie [or comic book] portray religion as violent or peaceful? Does a movie [or comic book] show religion to be a controlling factor in people's lives or a liberating factor? Does a movie [or comic book] make religious people out to be stupid? (Blizek and Desmarais, 2011: 79-80)

These questions are useful, but they betray a possible weakness of this approach; it has the potential to lack depth. Thankfully, some scholars have gone beyond the surface level of analysis that could limit this category. An increasing number of scholars are paying closer attention to how comments made about religions by film have affected and reflected the way these religions are understood in the 'real' world.

Adam McGee's article, 'Haitian Vodou and Voodoo: Imagined Religion and Popular Culture' (2012), is a notable piece of recent scholarship that fits into this category. McGee does not pay direct attention to comic books (he mentions them, but only in passing), but his methodology can be applied to both film and comic book media. McGee is most interested in the way Vodou is represented in popular culture, but his interrogation of the representation is what sets his scholarship apart. He distinguishes Vodou from the inaccurate representation of the religion that he terms 'voodoo'. McGee relates the poor and unwarranted reputation of Vodou to the production of blackness and black religion by claiming that 'voodoo continues, unabated and mostly under the radar, to disseminate and reinforce centuries-old racist tropes about blacks and black religiosity' (2012: 233). According to McGee, the continued misrepresentation of Vodou in popular culture creates an inaccurate picture of black and white history and identity. By representing Vodou as voodoo—a violent, hyper-sexualised version of the religion—blacks are cast into the role of secret and invisible aggressors while whites are cast into the role of victims

(McGee, 2012: 239). By exposing the function of voodoo in popular culture McGee connects the popular consumption of veiled racist tropes to the production of inaccurate racial identities. In short, he clearly shows the very real way popular culture (including superhero narratives in both comic books and film) can comment on or interpret a religion and the long-lasting impact those comments can leave behind.

Alison Smith conducts a similar analysis with a focus on the way Judaism has been presented and commented on in film. In her article, 'Judaism and Jewishness in Film' (2009), she conducts a socio-historical analysis of Jewishness and anti-Semitism on film, paying special attention to the social backdrop of Jewish producers. Additionally, she analyses the political changes that led to, and were influenced by, Hollywood addressing anti-Semitism on screen. Smith's work engages with issues of representation and the production of Jewish identity on film while also addressing the desires for, and fears of, assimilation that led to representations of Jewishness on film. Many, including Knowles, have written about Judaism and Superman, but the depth of Smith's analysis of film and Judaism sets it apart.

Although neither Smith nor McGee focus on comic book narratives, much can be learned and subsequently applied from their work. Their research serves as a reminder of the effect past texts can have on present interpretations of religious symbols. Voodoo, for instance, has evolved into a damaging signifier. As such, its presence in a narrative may impact the way any given reader/viewer interprets that narrative if their prior textual background includes texts that have re-appropriated Vodou into voodoo. As this dissertation leans heavily on audience interpretations of narratives and characters, the role of an author's (or system's) prejudice and the way those prejudices prime readers and viewers to recognize certain signifiers is also important and is revisited in depth in the methodology section.

Bruce David Forbes, unlike Smith and McGee, does focus on comic book narratives. His work is especially notable for two reasons: first, it was published in 1997, which makes it a relatively early example of comics and religion scholarship. Second, although it is a short article, it asks a grand question that paves the way for my own inquiry: 'Why do comic books include religious language and imagery' (Forbes, 1997: 10)? The title of Forbes's 1997 article ('Batman Crucified: Religion and Modern Superheroes') is misleading as it suggests a specific focus on Batman. While Forbes does highlight a few examples of particular characters, events, and narrative arcs with religious significance, he focuses on multiple characters, series, and comic book publishers in order to point to broader trends.

Forbes's work could arguably fit in the first category of this literature review (using religion to interpret or comment on film and comic books) due to the way he highlights specific religious parallels, symbols, and imagery. That said, his broader argument—that the presence of said parallels, symbols and imagery 'reflects religion's continuing role in providing resources for people engaged in quests of meaning or caught in struggles of good and evil' (Forbes, 1997: 10)—situates his work in this second category. He is, after all, using comic book narratives to comment on the role of religion in people's lives.

According to Forbes, comic books use religious content due to one (or more) of four key reasons. First, comic books use iconography that is present in the general surrounding culture of their production (Forbes, 1997: 11). Second, conflicts borne out of a good versus evil dramatic structure are common across superhero narratives and 'religion provides obviously applicable language and imagery to express such contests' (Forbes, 1997: 11). Third, the humanization of what Forbes characterizes as 'Modern Age reinterpretations' of classic heroes introduces characters 'with personal struggles and self doubts' who are often shown 'examining demons

within' and 'engaging in quests for meaning', which lends itself to familiar religious language (i.e., resurrection, born again, struggles between the flesh and the spirit, the return of the prodigal son, etc.) (Forbes, 1997: 11). Fourth, '[t]he comic book superhero is basically a redeemer' and their story is often one that follows an Americanised, Judeo-Christian version of 'the classical Greek/Roman heroic monomythic pattern' (Forbes, 1997: 11-12).

Following these observations, Forbes ultimately concludes that the tendency of superhero narratives to rely on religious language, themes, symbols, and tropes 'seems to touch upon yearnings for deliverance. In spite of claims about secularization in modern society, and many indications of disenchantment with traditional religious institutions, the power of religious images remains' (Forbes, 1997: 12). Forbes's article may be short (a mere three pages), but his observations about the reasons behind the religious content in a wide variety of superhero narratives are compelling and can be found in more substantial scholarship that is used throughout this thesis to investigate similar observations—especially the role of a humanized redemptive figure and the ubiquitous nature of religious symbolism in popular culture.

Jeffrey J. Kripal diverges from the theorists and critics reviewed so far by addressing how the production of superhero identities is related to religion. In *Mutants and Mystics* (2011) Kripal uses the representation of religion, diversity, mysticism, and superpowers in comic books as a way to investigate the production of the identities represented by key superheroes. Kripal grounds some of his work on identity and production in Orientalism. He claims that the origin stories of superhero identities that are connected to outer space can be traced back to the Orientalist desire to locate unknown mystical powers in the East. Kripal argues that 'for much of [pre-colonial] Western history this sacred source of power [which Kripal relates to religion] was traditionally located "far away," "long, long ago," and "in the East"' (2011: 27). Kripal goes on

to claim that post-colonization, 'the blank spots on the map became smaller and smaller, [and] there was a felt need to locate the Somewhere Else, well, somewhere else,' most often in outer space (2011: 27). Kripal's work is valuable and related to my own research because he identifies the role cultural histories and religion play in the development of superhero narratives, even if the creators of those narratives and characters are unaware of the influence of religion on their creative output. In short, Kripal addresses the way the worldview of the authors influences religious overtones in a superhero narrative, while theorists in the first category above are more focused on how the worldviews of the readers influence religious interpretations of superhero narratives. There are many other theorists who focus on the role of authorial intention, but I include Kripal, Forbes, Smith, and McGee because they all direct their attention to authorial impact without extensively commenting on intention.

The Religious Use of Film and Comic Books

Often, scholars in this category work out of 'a particular religious perspective or a particular faith community [and use] movies to help them become better followers of their faith' (Blizek and Desmarais, 2011: 480). Herbert A. Jump's 1910 article 'The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture' is a very early example of an article that advocates for the religious, in this case Christian, use of film.[20] Jump suggests that certain films can do for modern people what the parables of Jesus did for people of antiquity—bring religious truths to life. Jump claims that when 'Jesus desired to set forth the essential meaning of Christianity in a universal language that

[20] Though Jump is writing out of a very different historical moment than the one we occupy, his claims are still mirrored today. Although my own cultural and academic background has been primarily located in a Judeo-Christian context, the approach to transcendent styles of film and comic books that I advocate for throughout this thesis is applicable to all religious traditions, not only Christianity. In an effort to reflect the religious diversity of our current moment and work against my own cultural biases I have purposefully avoided further overtly Christian analyses of film and comic books in this section.

should speak to men of every age and all races, he chose a dramatic story' (2007: 15). He goes on to suggest that 'the visible drama shown in the right sort of motion picture, accordingly, has religious possibilities just as the spoken dramatic story or parable has them' (2007: 17). Jump's claims appear to apply to the religious use of film in general, but he only uses Judeo-Christian examples to prove his point. The Judeo-Christian focus of Jump's article is not surprising considering the geographical and historic context of his work, namely the United States of 1910. The religious landscape of the United States, and the rest of the Western world, has changed dramatically since Jump's time and so one would expect that scholarly writing on religion and film would reflect this newfound diversity.

Surprisingly, this is not always the case; the West may now have greater diversity, but—as demonstrated in the introduction above—many countries (the United States, England, and Canada for example) are still populated primarily by Christians. This population imbalance may make the plethora of religion and popular culture scholarship focused on Christianity less surprising than originally thought, but a population imbalance is not reason enough to account for the relative lack of religious diversity in this category. Unlike many religion and popular culture scholars, Saurav Mohapatra and Karline McLain break this trend as neither scholar focuses on Judeo-Christian traditions. Instead, they both focus on Eastern traditions.

Mohapatra, writing about the Hindu rebirth cycle as expressed in the Vedas, treats the comic book superhero as an unlikely site of profound significance. Mohapatra claims that Vedic philosophy 'in its purest form, for me at least, manifests itself quite pristinely in an unlikely arena—comic book superheroes' (2010: 22). He then goes on to show how the pages of the comic book communicate this philosophy better than the reality of 'the abominable practice of the caste system' (2010: 22). Mohapatra's article is notable because it demonstrates the religious

use of the comic book as an alternate site of expression for ancient Vedic philosophies. Even though Mohapatra's work is noteworthy and interesting, his heavy reliance on notions of authorship and uncorroborated claims concerning the religious influence of authors, like Alan Moore (2010: 126), draws attention to the weaknesses of studies that ignore the role of audiences in religious interpretations of any text. Authorial intention is certainly a valid point of inquiry, but Mohapatra's work could have been strengthened if other factors relating to the production and audience consumption of the text were given more attention.

McLain's article, 'The Place of Comics in the Hindu Imagination' (2011) is similar to Mohapatra's but is especially impressive due to the way it investigates how comic books can be used for religious purposes on a deeper level. Her article focuses on 'India's most prominent comic book series, *Amar Chitra Katha*, and its connections to classical Hindu mythology and modern Hindu nationalist ideology' (McLain, 2011: 598). McLain's work's inclusion in this category may, at first, seem questionable as she is not writing from a theological standpoint. She does, however, investigate how a comic book filled with religious themes has been used by Indian government officials, schools, and nationalist groups to attempt to forge a unified and anti-Muslim religious identity.

McLain's article serves as an example of the depth achievable by scholars who analyse the religious use of comic books. Her brief overview of the history of comics in India includes a discussion of how 'a desire for an Indian mythology to be widely known instead of just the Greek mythology officially taught' (McLain, 2011: 599) led to the birth of Indian comics. This discussion brings attention to the social backdrop that led to the production, regulation, and consumption of early Indian comics. Her further discussion of the usage of Hindu comic books as tools for 'anti-Muslim national integration' (McLain, 2011: 601) continues to draw attention

to the consumption, production, and regulation of comics while also dealing, in detail, with issues related to religious representation and identity. She employs a uniquely thorough engagement with multiple aspects related to the cultural and religious impacts on and of comics, which makes her work broadly applicable to many scholarly pursuits related to religion, society, individuals, and popular culture—including mine.

Film and Comic Books as Religion

The treatment of film or comic books as religion is, by no means, the most common approach—Blizek and Desmarais do not even include it as one of their categories. In his 2003 essay 'Film as Religion: Myths, Morals and Rituals' Lyden, however, suggests that this approach is more traditional and common than one might assume. He claims that 'traditional religion has always reacted to film as if it were a religion, even when this was not explicitly admitted' (2007: 417). Lyden's 2003 book (of the same title, republished as a second edition in 2019) and 2015 Rabbi Sydney and Jane Brook's lecture at the University of Nebraska Omaha (entitled 'Watching Movies, Seeing Transcendence: Film as a Site of Interfaith Encounter') was featured in the *Journal of Film & Religion* and speaks to the enduring presence of his novel—even radical—claim that film can function as religion and that religion has always reacted to film as such.

Any claim that includes 'always' is necessarily problematic. That said, there is a fair amount of evidence for Lyden's suggestion. In the 1963 article 'Metaphors on Vision' Stan Brakhage seems to consistently treat the cinema as a religious place. In addition, Brakhage saturates his writing with religious imagery referring, for example, to cinema goers as 'the devout' 'who break popcorn together' during 'double-featured services' (2007: 62). Brakhage's

claims are very similar to Marsh's, though—perhaps due to the length restraints of an article as opposed to a monograph—his analysis is not as thorough and does not include a variety of case studies to illustrate his point. Neither Brakhage nor Marsh directly address superheroes, but both scholars maintain that film and filmgoing have external similarities to religion and religious practices. Although Brakhage seems less concerned with the functional similarities than Marsh, the religious treatment of film by both Brakhage and Marsh is mirrored by other scholars who treat comic book characters and narratives as potential stand-ins for more traditional religious figures and stories. Much of Brakhage's article concentrates on, as Mitchell and Plate put it, 'thinking through the formalist-realist approaches to film, and their implications for understanding the religious dimensions of film' (2007[b]: 47). Brakhage's focus on form is mirrored in André Bazin's and Paul Schrader's work on film and religion.[21] Similarly, Douglas Rushkoff and Darby Orcutt fix their attention on form as it relates to religion in their comic-centred work while other theorists, like Deacy and Lyden, mirror Marsh's functional approach to the parallels between film and religion.

Bazin, speaking about *The Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1951, originally titled *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne*), claims that the film is uniquely religious. In what seems to be a precursor to Schrader's work, Bazin appears to use the film to develop a transcendental style of film.[22] For Bazin, Bresson's films are not only transcendent, but uniquely so. He claims that the film's transcendence 'is not the transcendence of destiny as the ancients understood it, nor yet the transcendence of Racinian passion, but the transcendence of grace which is

[21] Both André Bazin's and Paul Schrader's transcendental styles of film are explored in great detail in the methodology section of this thesis.

[22] Most research focused on 'the transcendent' and film use 'the transcendent' almost synonymously with concepts like 'spiritual,' 'divine,' and 'god'. Though 'transcendent' can be used quite broadly to refer to anything above or beyond something else, I will be using the term in the same religious sense as the research I have reviewed.

something each of us is free to refuse' (Bazin, 2007: 58). Bazin recognises the Christian parallels throughout *The Diary of a Country Priest* but does not connect these parallels to the film's religious or transcendent quality and potential. For him, the Christian parallels of the film carry their own individual meanings and are not simply imitations of the divine model but actual repetitions of it (Bazin, 2007: 59). He expresses what he sees as the utterly unique transcendent quality of *The Diary of a Country Priest* when he suggests that through this particular film,

> probably for the first time, the cinema gives us a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements are those of the life of the spirit. Not only that, it also offers us a new dramatic form, that is specifically religious—or better still, specifically theological; a phenomenology of salvation and grace. (Bazin, 2007: 59)

Paul Schrader, like Bazin, identifies Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* as an excellent example of a film that exemplifies his own transcendental style. For Schrader, the effectiveness of the film is located in both its formal style (the way it balances overabundance and sparsity) as well as its narrative structure (Schrader, 1972). A full delineation of Schrader's work as well as a more detailed analysis and application of Bazin's seminal text is undertaken throughout the rest of the thesis. For now, suffice it to say that both Bazin and Schrader recognize the transcendent potential of films like *Diary of a Country Priest* due, in part, to its formal qualities.

Wanda E. Avila also lauds the Bresson film as the example *par excellence* of how film can successfully communicate the transcendent. She grounds the transcendent quality of *Diary of a Country Priest* in Bazinian realism, which she contrasts with the religious extravagance of other films (like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)). Throughout her article Avila contrasts the two styles of religious, filmic expression while claiming that Gibson's over-the-top style is too far removed from viewers' day-to-day lives to reveal the transcendent work of grace in everyday life: in contrast, she claims that Bresson's film accomplishes his goal of making

'people who see [it] feel the presence of God in ordinary life' (Bresson, qtd in Avila, 2006: 4). It is important to note that Avila's claim that over-the-top religious films (like Gibson's) do not have the same transcendent potential as more 'realistic' films is not uncontested. In the latter sections of this thesis I will be problematising theories of transcendent film styles in order to demonstrate that over-the-top representations of religion and the divine may too elicit transcendent responses from viewers.

Deacy, like Bazin, Schrader, and Avila, examines the religious function of film, but does so without focusing on the formal and narrative qualities that allow a film to express the transcendent. He proposes that the film industry 'is one of many contemporary secular agencies that have taken on many of the functions that we would historically associate with traditional religious institutions' (2007: 310). In a 1999 article entitled 'Screen Christologies: An Evaluation of the Role of Christ-Figures in Film' as well as a 2001 book entitled *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film,* Deacy analyses the redemptive potential of both religious and secular filmic Christ-figures. At no point does Deacy claim that he is developing an expanded version of Bazin or Schrader's transcendental styles. That said, his general argument that *film noir* is particularly well suited to house redemptive figures and possibly serve as an 'analogous site of Christological—and, as a corollary, of redemptive—activity' (Deacy, 1999: 335) suggests that the films he analyses have a transcendent quality that resides outside the narrow requirements that both Bazin and Schrader outline. Deacy's work is especially useful (and will be engaged with in a more thorough manner in the methodology and case study sections of this thesis) because he also briefly engages with the redemptive potential of superheroes in film. He does not spend very much time specifically addressing comic books, but his claim that film is 'one of many contemporary secular agencies' that may have social religious

functions suggests that other parts of modern secular society, like the comic book, could also share this capacity.

Even if one does not subscribe to the above claims, or to a definition of religion broad enough to include comic books and film as religion, the parallel functions of religious narratives and comic book and film narratives are difficult to ignore. McLain recognizes these parallels and suggests that

> these comics [Hindu comics, specifically *Amar Chitra Katha*] do not just entail stories about the sacred; for many Hindu readers the comics are sacred. Repeatedly, Hindus credited *Amar Chitra Katha* with bringing mythology to life through the visual representation of the Hindu pantheon. Many adults could describe in detail specific images of Hindu gods that still resonate with them from the comics they read as children. A handful confessed that during their puja or ritual worship, they sometimes envision the deity as depicted in the comics. (2011: 602)

Similarly, Greg Garrett proposes that comic book superheroes have become part of our (Western) collective mythology (2008: 5) and is not the only North American writer to make this claim. Knowles proposes the same thing; indeed, the whole of his book relies on this premise. Knowles does not match the theoretical depth of McLain, but the parallels, even at the surface level, that both Knowles and Garrett recognize are striking. These parallels extend past the obvious saviour-figure similarities of characters like Superman and also apply to the way fans express devotion to their favourite superheroes—a phenomenon Knowles labels the ‘Cult of the Superhero’ (2007: 15).

Knowles suggests that superheroes, in some respects, fill the functional role of a god for some of their fans. He claims that the seriousness with which some fans treat their favourite superhero is not unlike the reverence one would expect from a religious adherent (Knowles, 2007: 3). Knowles goes on to observe that the comic book ‘canons’ attached to each comic book character, along with deutero-canonical material affiliated with the characters, are treated very

similarly to religious approved texts and deutero-canonical stories. The strongest piece of evidence Knowles uses to support his 'Cult of the Superhero' claim is related to the parallels he makes between 'cosplay' and worship. Cosplay, the act of dressing up as, and sometimes mimicking the traits of, a favourite superhero or villain is, according to Knowles, similar to some forms of ancient worship conducted by religious adherents who would dress up like their favourite deity (2007: 5-6). When taken in conjunction with Garrett's claim that 'our American superheroes are equal parts demigods from Greek myth, strongmen and prophets from the Judeo-Christian tradition, literary lions and characters from folktales and pop culture traditions' (Garrett, 2008: 10), the parallels Knowles observes may point to a very real possibility that, for some, superheroes have begun to fill the shoes of gods.

Transcendent Style and Superhero Narratives

So then, it is clear that there is something about both film and comic books (especially superhero comic books) that lend the two media to religious interpretations, uses, and functions. Current transcendent film theories are not sufficient to explain these relationships for two reasons: 1) they cannot be applied to comic books because of medial differences and 2) they only account for the relationship between religion and certain styles of films, which often exclude superhero movies. As such, a new approach to transcendental style that makes space for superhero narratives and can be adapted to apply to film and comic books needs to be developed.

Sheila J. Nayar has also interrogated the problematically narrow characteristics of what most scholars would currently identify as a 'transcendental style of film'. She recognizes that Schrader's

> exposition of a cross-cultural style that expresses the Holy continues to hold currency in film studies, particularly the branch that explores the intersections of religion and

> art film (i.e., films by the likes of Robert Bresson or Andrei Tarkovsky). In other words, the transcendental style is not a style typically identified with Hollywood. Indeed, Hollywood spectaculars that portray religion in the fashion of *The Ten Commandments* [Cecile B. DeMille, 1956] are spurious, so Schrader contends, due to their conveying transcendence via the deployment of cosmic projectiles, miraculous cures, or some other, similarly overabundant means of expression. (Nayar, 2010: 101)

Nayar then goes on to problematize the common conception that overtly, extravagantly religious films fail to adequately express the transcendent and elicit spiritual and/or transformational responses in viewers when she claims that, despite *The Ten Commandments'* gaudy extravagance, 'many viewers did find genuine religious meaning in its abundant style' (2010: 102). For Nayar, the fact that films like *The Ten Commandments* and various Bollywood spectacular epics seem to, against what transcendental style theorists would expect, successfully manifest the holy points toward the need to reconsider what qualifies as the '"genuinely" sacred onscreen' (2010: 102). In other words, currently recognized transcendent styles of film do not account for the lived, spiritual experiences that many viewers have after watching movies that fall outside the parameters established by Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy.

Nayar laments the lack of plurality of religious expression in film given the diverse religious expressions found in many cultures. She then goes on to identify what she sees as the root cause of this narrow conception of transcendent expression on screen: viewers who privilege the written word over the oral word will tend toward film styles that more closely resonate with literate storytelling ('quiet, quiescent, quotidian, and sans the clues or signposts that too easily assist a viewer in comprehending a narrative's events' [Nayar, 2010: 120]). Conversely, viewers accustomed to oral stories will respond more readily to films that mirror the oral episteme, which allows for spectacle and characters that stand out (thus becoming more memorable and increasing the likelihood that the story will be retold in the future) (Nayar, 2010: 110). Nayar

claims that by 'introducing the oral episteme into the [transcendent style] discussion, not only do we emphasize the pluralistic nature of the transcendental experience; as well, we fruitfully blur some of the envisioned dichotomies between, inter alia, East and West, and Christian and Hindu' (2010: 121). Nayar follows this claim with a call for scholars to be 'more ethnographically attuned to how non- or low-literate viewers describe and experience filmic manifestations of the sacred' (2010: 122). Though I have reservations about how large a role literacy plays in the way audiences react to extravagant epic narratives—I am more inclined to link the lack of religious plurality to a lack of diversity in Hollywood—I find Nayar's observations refreshing and take her call to allow for a plurality of filmic transcendent expressions seriously. Though Bollywood epics and superhero narratives do not fit traditional transcendent narrative styles, they do seem to elicit a spiritual response in readers and viewers. Because of this, I argue that a new approach to transcendent style that makes room for epic narratives (like superhero narratives) be developed.

Returning to Lyden's work serves as a useful starting point to create space for superhero narratives in current understandings of the transcendent and film. Lyden's claim that film is a site of interfaith encounter where the infinite is made visible and the transcendent is made present is a broad one that, by necessity, must include films that rely on more extravagant means than Bazin or Schrader would allow. Moreover, his view that the presence of liminal figures (i.e., figures that are 'outside the ordinary' and straddle the line between the 'sacred and profane', the religious and the secular) enhances this function seems to make space for films containing figures—like superheroes—who would be hard to imagine in a film like Bresson's *Diary* (Lyden, 2016: 39:10).

Comic books and films are not identical media and so transcendental film theory cannot simply be transposed onto the comic book medium—regardless of narrative type. That said, by

opening up the possibility that superhero films can express the transcendent, we also increase the extent to which transcendent film theory can be adapted to fit the comic book medium. This is especially valuable because, unlike film, there is currently no transcendent comic book style to draw from or critique. There are an increasing number of articles on how transcendence has been expressed in comic books—*Comics and Sacred Texts: Reimagining Religion and Graphic Narratives* (Assaf Gamzou and Ken Koltun-Fromm, 2018) and *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, 2010) are two excellent edited collections of such articles—but there is not a fully outlined approach to a transcendental style of comic book. The lack of a transcendent comic book theory is both surprising and disappointing given that the parallels between religion and comic books go beyond character similarities and fan devotion.[23] It is my hope that by adapting and expanding existing transcendent styles of film to make room for superhero narratives and by demonstrating how the formal qualities of the comic book can enhance the transcendent potential of superhero narratives that this thesis will help pave the way for future research and a transcendent theory of the comic book.

[23] Rushkoff and Orcutt have drawn attention to the way structural components of the comic book may allow it to function as a religious text. Rushkoff claims that the structure of the comic book—its use of panels and gutters (the white space that separates panels)—grants the comic book a 'unique ability [. . .] to communicate, simulate, and perhaps even actualize transcendence' (2010: xii). Similarly, Orcutt claims that the multi-modality of the comic book medium allows it to express narratives similar to religious ones because both comic book and religious narratives include similar 'symbolic texts, images [and] involve and evoke multiple ways of interpreting and understanding' (2010: 95).

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

There are four things I hope to have demonstrated in the literature review that precedes this section. First, I wanted to indicate that research that investigates the relationship between film and religion and comic books and religion is lacking. Second, I wanted to draw attention to the fact that scholarship that investigates the religious functions of comic books and film is both *especially* lacking and *especially* promising. Third, I wanted to illustrate how superhero narratives are fertile ground for promising research in the religious function—the transcendent potential—of certain films and comic book stories. Fourth, I wanted to draw attention to how the few formal theories of transcendent film style are too restrictive to allow for the type of big-budget movies that house superhero narratives.

In his monograph (*Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*) Roy M. Anker paints a history of film's longstanding relationship with religion as one that was born at modern filmmaking's inception (Anker, 2004: 5). For Anker, film—from the beginning—has always interacted with religion and, I would add, transcendence as an extension of that relationship. Anker is not alone in his perception of film as a phenomenon that regularly finds itself interacting with and expressing religion or spirituality.[24] In 'Faith in Film'—Christopher Deacy's contribution to Routledge's reader on religion and film—he suggests that 'if a line of demarcation can be drawn between an "objectively" religious film and an ostensibly "secular" movie—the classic sacred versus profane distinction—it is a very blurred, broken, and

[24] Throughout this thesis I will be using the words spiritual and spirituality to refer to experiences of the transcendent or divine that do not necessarily fit into defined religious traditions, communities, movements, rituals, or practices.

permeable one' (Deacy, 2007: 307). The growing library of articles, monographs, and edited collections—a sample of which was outlined and examined in the literature review section—over the last decade that focuses on religion and superhero narratives across media, including film, adds strength to Deacy's claim. That said, many transcendent film theorists do appear to advocate for a separation between a film that is wholly secular and a film that truly communicates and imparts the transcendent qualities of spirituality.

Though Anker does not appear to draw such a line, he does discuss the challenges of communicating the transcendent in film when he points out that transcendence 'in most religious traditions—Eastern and Western alike—proclaims its very hiddenness, invisibility, and inaccessibility to human perception, no matter how much people yearn for clear indications of divine presence. Thus, the question for filmmakers is how to make the Invisible visible' (Anker, 2004: 6). Anker locates the answer to this by focusing on the ordinary in order to point to the extraordinary (Anker, 2004: 13). If his solution is to be believed (and it is supported by scholarship that both pre-dates and follows his monograph) then superhero narratives become a grey area. On the one hand, superheroes tend to begin their story as ordinary men and women who become extraordinary through a variety of means, which would fit quite nicely into Anker's model. On the other hand, once superheroes become extraordinary, they tend to stay that way.

So then, non-origin story superhero narratives almost always rely entirely on an extraordinary character (or cast of characters) emerging victorious in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. The god-like powers of some of these characters are not only visible but are often the focal point of the whole film, which would disqualify these types of films from being good examples of Anker's description of transcendent style. That said, if we recall Sheila J. Nayar's article (also analysed in the literature review) we come across a problem: some

audience members have spiritual responses to films that fall outside the scope of Anker's solution. Before moving on to a transcendent theory of film that may be more inclusive of superhero narratives it is prudent to thoroughly examine the scholarship that bookends Anker's monograph by starting with one of the most prominent scholars by whom film studies has been influenced—André Bazin.

Toward an Expanded Transcendental Style

Bazin recognized that '"the cinema has always been interested in God"' (qtd in Mitchell and Plate, 2007[a]: 1) while still devoting significant scholarship to the proper way God (or, for our purpose, the transcendent) should and should not be expressed in film. In the literature review I provided a brief overview of Bazin's positive reading of Bresson's 1951 *The Diary of a Country Priest*, which he praises as uniquely transcendent not because of its obvious religious parallels but because—in part—of its lack of overt religiosity. Even though the main character of the film is a priest, the focus of the narrative is on the human interactions and feelings of the priest. For Bazin the way films like *Diary of a Country Priest* express spirituality and grace is through their commitment to realism and the way faith operates in the day-to-day lives of saint-like characters. He lauds the way Bresson 'avoids any sort of symbolic allusion and so none of the situations, despite their obvious parallel to the Gospel, is created precisely because of that parallel. Each carries its own biographical and individual meaning. Its Christlike resemblance comes second. […] [It is not] an imitation of its divine model, rather it is a repetition and a picturing forth of that life' (Bazin, 2007: 59).

He praises another religious film (*Heaven Over the Marshes* [Augusto Genina, 1949]) as 'the first theological film to assert—through the very nature of its characters, story, and events—

the total transcendence of grace, which occurs at the expense of apologetics [and] Christian propaganda' (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 7). Interestingly, the obvious religious parallels in both *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Heaven Over the Marshes* did not appear to trouble Bazin. Instead, he reserves his disdain for religiosity and spectacle for the sake of religiosity and spectacle. His frank warnings on the subject are worth quoting at length:

> Everything that is exterior, ornamental, liturgical, sacramental, hagiographic, and miraculous in the everyday observance, doctrine, and practice of Catholicism does indeed show specific affinities with the cinema considered as a formidable iconography. But these affinities, which have made for the success of countless films, are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them. Almost everything that is good in this domain was created not by the exploitation of these patent affinities, but rather by working against them: by the psychological and moral deepening of the religious factor as well as by the renunciation of the physical representation of the supernatural and of grace. (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 1)

Bazin's antagonistic relationship with the 'physical representation of the supernatural and of grace' seems to be rooted in his understanding of film as a medium whose virtue lies in its ability to record reality in an objective manner (Bird, 2007: 392) and in his belief that 'the signs that God sends to his people are not always supernatural' and that 'the camera lens is not the eye of God, and microphones could not have recorded the voices heard by Joan of Arc' (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 7).

So then, the transcendent film (for Bazin) is not one that is full of religious spectacle but is primarily a film about real experience; a film that, as Amédée Ayfre—one of his disciples—suggests 'evokes in the viewer the sense of its ineffable mystery' (qtd in Bird, 2007: 393). I suggest that, for Bazin, requiring film to transform reality into something supernatural would violate the very miracle of cinema—recording reality as it happens and when it happens through an automatic process of recording light. Because of this, superhero narratives featuring the likes

of Captain America, Batman, Superman, and Dr. Manhattan would not fit into a Bazinian form of transcendental theory.

It is important to note that Bazin's reliance on realism to express the transcendent in film is not to be translated to other visual arts that find their roots in painting or drawing, like comics. Bazin himself recognized that painting and photography (and arts that are part of their respective lineages) are fundamentally different in the way they express reality. Burke Hilsabeck, writing about Bazin's *What Is Cinema?* and its relationship with some of Stanley Cavell's work, devotes considerable space to reviewing some of the analogies Bazin used to express film's role in reflecting reality. Two of Bazin's analogies—that of the snowflake/flower and that of the fingerprint—are especially relevant to the role film plays in communicating transcendence and to the inherent differences between film and more painterly arts.

First, we can consider the snowflake and flower simile. According to Hilsabeck, Bazin 'suggests that "photography has an effect upon us of a natural phenomenon, like a flower or a snowflake whose beauty is inseparable from its earthly origin'" (Hilsabeck, 2016: 31) but makes it clear that 'photographic images are not materially like flowers or snowflakes' (Hilsabeck, 2016: 32). Rather, for Bazin, their beauty shares the same origin in that 'it is a result of a process that does not involve the human hand and that it is, in this sense, a part of the world rather than its mimesis' (Hilsabeck, 2016: 32). Second, the fingerprint analogy. Hilsabeck's summary of Bazin's comparison suggests that the difference between film and photography is not always aesthetic but is instead rooted in the production of the image itself. Since a photograph—and film as an extension of the photograph—finds its beauty in its earthly origin, a painting of a photograph cannot possibly share this beauty as it is manufactured and necessarily less 'real'. A person 'might render in ink a very accurate fingerprint, but it would not serve the same purpose

as a fingerprint taken from my hand. The two images, even if perceptually indistinguishable, occupy different places in games of reference' (Hilsabeck, 2016: 33). Since Bazin locates the transcendence of a film in its ability to express reality in a way that is unavailable to other media—even if that reality looks identical—it would follow that arts with a painterly lineage would not be able to express the reality of transcendence in the same way as film. This distinction is one of the primary reasons that some transcendental film theories cannot be applied to comic books and one that has significant ramifications on the application of any transcendental style of film theory rooted in Bazinian realism (both narratively and physically).

If two indistinguishable images occupy a different frame of reference that affects their function and is based on their respective methods of production, it follows that production changes in film would affect its frame of reference and function. This becomes especially important when the role of CGI is considered. Is it possible that modern superhero filmic blockbusters would, for Bazin, occupy a frame of reference he reserves for more artistic endeavours because of the role humans now play in digitally painting landscapes, characters, and sounds? If so, it is possible that Bazin may not have objected to the inclusion of supernatural elements in these films because the form of recording those narratives has migrated toward the realm of painting and other similar arts. Regardless of the answer to that question, it is clear that film production styles and its formal qualities have undergone significant changes: very few films do not involve some sort of editing that would hinder an understanding of film as capable of truly recording reality.[25]

Furthermore, the influx of amateur filmmaking, given that smartphones are nearly ubiquitous in most regions and often enable people of any age and background to record and edit

[25] Even Bresson's films, which Bazin praises, are not truly realistic: they involve editing and other artificial devices like voiceover. That said, they carry an air of realism that superhero films do not share.

a video quickly and relatively easily, brings with it a greater and more widespread knowledge of how easily a filmic image can be modified to present a version of reality rather than an ultimate and unaltered recording of reality. In short, filmmaking has changed so radically that humanity's ontological relationship with film has changed as well. As such, any theory that was developed with specific, historically located cinematic production methods in mind cannot possibly be applied to modern films without serious caveats. Because of this, I will be limiting my use of Bazin's theory to the aspects that apply to narrative, which still largely disqualifies superhero stories from being heralded as an example of a transcendent film style.

Paul Schrader approaches the role of film and the transcendent from a different angle than Bazin, but still grounds it in realism and in the specific qualities of the film medium. Schrader begins by recognizing that 'art and religion are [transcendence's] twin manifestations' (Schrader, 1972: 7). He then contends that 'the proper function of transcendental art is [. . .] to express the Holy itself (the Transcendent), and not to express or illustrate holy feelings' (Schrader, 1972: 7). In film, Schrader argues that 'precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing— [are used] for predetermined transcendental ends' (Schrader, 1972: 3). He goes beyond simply describing how film creates transcendental art and what the function of that art should be; rather, he—like Bazin—describes a style of film that accomplishes said function.

Like Bazin, Schrader focuses on formal qualities of film and how they can be manipulated to create a style of film that lends itself to expressing the transcendent. For Schrader, film can and does 'operate on a spiritual plane' but accomplishes this through style, not content (Schrader 2018: 2). A transcendental film can be, and often is, religious in nature but spiritual themes, characters, and analogies do not necessarily contribute to the transcendent potential of any given film: 'Church people [have] been using movies since they first moved to

illustrate religious beliefs, but this [transcendental style] [is] something different' (Schrader, 2018: 2). Schrader claims that in order to actualize transcendence a film must work against what movies are inherently adept at, namely driving narratives via the vehicles of empathy and action (Schrader 2018: 17). He sees film as an instructive medium: the film guides the viewer's gaze, attention, and emotions (Schrader, 2017). The audience member is told which characters to care about, at which moments to feel sad, joyful, angry, etc., and which objects are most important in any given frame (Schrader, 2017). It is only by withholding that guidance that a film can fit into Schrader's transcendental style.

Schrader situates his transcendental style of film as 'one of several precursors to slow cinema' (Schrader, 2018: 21) and delineates how transcendental filmmakers often use slow-cinema techniques to achieve 'the mechanics of transcendental style—the everyday, disparity, decisive action, [and] stasis' that a film must show through formal means to actualize transcendence (Schrader, 2018: 22). Interestingly, the 'mechanics of transcendental style' seem to have to appear in a specific order with a distinct narrative quality to it for those mechanics to be effective. First, the film must create a sense of an everyday, dull normalcy. Second, it must interrupt this normalcy with some sort of disparity—'an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment which culminates in a decisive action' (Schrader, 1972: 42). Lastly, the film must end in a state that Schrader calls stasis—'a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it' (Schrader, 1972: 49). The narrative-like sequence of the mechanics that Schrader identifies as essential to creating a transcendental style of film is notable because of how he repeatedly frames his style as one that takes an antagonistic approach to narrative. Some of the techniques that he outlines as potential building blocks of both slow cinema and transcendental style include techniques that deliberately hinder the narrative ease of a film.

These include the following: the use of wide angles so that 'the frame doesn't direct the viewer's gaze; it frees it to wander'; static frames used in conjunction with a long take; minimal 'coverage' so that the film is less effective at governing an audience member's attention and visual focus; offset edits that occur at unexpected times to create dissonance; a lack of dialogue so that scenes seem slower than they are; very little composed music to heighten the audience's 'sense of being in a specific moment in time'; heightened diegetic sound effects; visual flatness; repetition in both scene composition and narrative information; actors who barely act or move so that they become 'figures in a composed landscape'; and withholding colour by privileging black and white film aesthetics (Schrader, 2018: 12-16). According to Schrader, all of these techniques accomplish the same end: they reinforce the dissonance that is inherent to slow cinema and beneficial to transcendental style (Schrader, 2018: 12). The use of the long take in conjunction with wide angles and delayed cuts is especially interesting because of the way, according to Schrader, these techniques invite the viewer to become a greater participant in the creation of the movie (Schrader, 2018: 17-19). During a long take precipitated by a delayed cut and, perhaps, shot with a wide angle, the viewer's eye can wander: 'What is happening here? A new movie is being created. A simultaneous movie. The spectator's movie. Bazin scholars describe this as "the democracy of the eye"—given opportunity, the eye will explore' (Schrader, 2018: 19). In other words, 'the smash cut depreciates the viewer's participation; the delayed cut demands it' (Schrader, 2018: 18).

At first glance it would appear that Schrader's transcendental style is not applicable to either superhero narratives on film or in comic books due to its very medium-specific formal requirements. On the one hand, this is true. Schrader never intended his style to be applicable to highly commercialized, action-packed, empathy-driven Hollywood blockbuster films (Schrader,

2017). That said, his formal 'mechanics' of transcendental style have a narrative element (they must occur in a very specific order) that, when combined with other character, narrative, and medial qualities, can create space for the transcendent potential of superhero narratives to emerge. As this thesis progresses, I will highlight the transcendent potential of superhero narratives in both films and comic books by demonstrating how Schrader's conception of everyday banality, disparity, decisive action, and stasis can be achieved through narrative choices. Furthermore, I will argue that the formal elements of the comic book (like written dialogue, panels, and a lack of extra-diegetic sound) can enhance the transcendent potential of the superhero narrative when these formal elements are used in innovative ways. Before I conduct case studies that demonstrate these narrative and formal functions, other factors that impact the transcendent potential of superhero narratives on film and in comic books must be explored.

Christopher Deacy does not lay out a transcendental style as such, but he does study films (many of which Schrader was involved in creating) in order to examine how filmic Christ figures may be able to offer an opportunity for audience members to begin a process of redemption (Deacy, 1999 and Deacy, 2001). While Schrader does not explicitly link transcendence to redemption, his characterization of transcendental style as one in which the film brings the viewer into the mystery of the divine through encouraging contemplation and meditation (Schrader, 2017) makes room for redemption. What is redemption (in the Christian tradition that Deacy primarily writes about) if not an encounter with the divine mystery precipitated by contemplation and meditation?

Like Bazin and Schrader, Deacy does not claim that the presence of a religious theme or figure in film is enough for the film to encourage an encounter with the divine mystery (what

defines a transcendent film for Schrader), grace (one of the things that sets apart a truly religious film for Bazin), or redemption. Where Bazin and Schrader primarily locate the transcendent potential of a film in its formal qualities, Deacy focuses on how a film's story, characters, and style combine to create a redemptive opportunity for the viewer to participate in. Interestingly, he locates *film noir* as an unlikely seat of redemptive potential (Deacy, 2001: 37).

According to Deacy *film noir* begins to carve out a redemptive space through displaying, front and centre, the inherent suffering that defines much of human existence:

> Insofar as the dysfunctional and alienated condition of humankind is the starting-point of redemption within the Christian tradition, there is thus a significant sense in which the medium of *film noir*, in bearing witness to and epitomizing this 'fallen' condition, could be said to constitute a potentially rich repository of redemptive significance. (Deacy, 2001: 51)

Although *film noir*'s ability to invite audience members to confront the suffering that permeates the world serves as an excellent redemptive starting point it is not enough to allow the full process of redemption to occur—'to be completed such a redemptive process needs to be supplemented and qualified by the specific function of a *redeemer-figure*, without which the process could be said to lack both focus and intelligibility' (Deacy, 2001: 69). Deacy identifies the *noir* protagonist as an effective (perhaps surprisingly so) *'functional equivalent of Christ*, who performs the Christlike role of undertaking a process of redemption from sin, guilt and alienation, the benefits of which may be passed on and imparted to other human beings' (Deacy, 2001: 76). The *noir* protagonist's ability to not only achieve redemption for themselves (and others in the diegetic narrative), but also to guide viewers through a similar process is key to the redemptive potential of the films Deacy analyses. For him, a protagonist whose redemption is limited to on-screen characters cannot function as a Christ-figure—they must be able to guide the viewer to the same end. According to Deacy the *noir* protagonist achieves this redeemer

function by exemplifying a low form of Christology that makes them an authentically human character through whom the audience can share a redemptive journey (Deacy, 2001: 78-89).

From the beginning of recorded Christian history the Christian tradition has attempted to bear witness to two simultaneous (and arguably, incongruous) conceptions of Christ:

> As the New Testament record illustrates, on the one hand a heavenly power—the divine Logos indeed—has become incarnate in a human being, and on the other hand it is also supposed that the result of this incarnation is completely human, possessing the same limitations and weakness as any 'ordinary' and finite human being. (Deacy, 1999: 325)

Deacy argues that much of Hollywood cinema's history with redemptive figures on screen has been more analogous to high forms of Christology than low forms of Christology. Put simply (and in a very truncated manner) high forms of Christology privilege the divine nature of Christ at the expense of his human nature while low forms of Christology privilege the human nature of Christ (sometimes at the expense of his divine nature). Any film that presents a redemptive figure who prevails against all odds without much of a struggle (like many Superman films) is an example of a film that privileges the high Christological conception of Christ while films that show a redemptive figure's humanity (flaws, self-doubt, suffering) is one that may privilege low Christology or, depending on how the character is portrayed, achieve a difficult balance between the two that Christianity itself has struggled to maintain. The importance of balancing the god-like and human-like qualities of superheroes as it relates to the transcendent potential of any given superhero narrative will be revisited throughout this thesis. For now, suffice it to say that a character with few weaknesses who prevails against any challenge without a real risk of failure or struggle is one who hinders the redemptive and, as an extension, the transcendent potential of any film.

Deacy conducts detailed analyses of many of Scorsese's films, including ones that involved Paul Schrader as a screenwriter (like *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980), and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)) to demonstrate how each film, true to *film noir*'s nature, features a protagonist who is authentically human and only achieves redemption through immense suffering. Although Deacy sees emphasizing the humanity of a character as imperative to the success of that character's redemptive function, it is important to note that he does not claim that a protagonist becomes Christlike by simply epitomizing the human experience of pain and suffering:

> Clearly, it is not the case that all film protagonists are 'Christ-like' simply by virtue of being intrinsically human in nature, and performing acts that accord with various tenets of Christ's life and work. Rather, for the film protagonist to be in any fundamental sense Christ-like, and to be capable of imparting the possibility of redemption, there must be a specific confrontation with evil and suffering, and with the human propensity towards sin—the absolute and non-negotiable prerequisite of redemption in the Christian tradition. (Deacy, 2001: 96)

For Deacy, the protagonists in *Taxi Driver*, *Raging Bull*, and *The Last Temptation of Christ* accomplish this feat. This is especially notable because Schrader has said that, until very recently, he had no interest in attempting (and therefore, until 2017's *First Reformed*, never attempted) to make a film that he would define as an example of transcendental style. In fact, Schrader's style would certainly not allow for the films that Deacy analyses to be included within its boundaries. Yet, Deacy effectively demonstrates the redemptive potential of such films. This suggests that encountering the transcendent—whether it be through beginning a journey of redemption and confronting evil, suffering, and one's own sinfulness or, as Schrader suggests, through meditation and contemplation—is clearly possible through films that do not fit in either Bazin or Schrader's framework.

It is important to note that most superhero films do not fall within the *film noir* genre that Deacy identifies as a seat of redemptive potential. The very god-like nature of many superheroes that suggests they have a divine transcendent quality would, for Deacy, work against the redemptive potential of any film featuring them:

> In effect, the more authentically human the film protagonist, the more authentic and fertile the possibility of redemptive activity. As with the crucifixion of Christ, if it was not for the suffering and pain that the redeemer undergoes, there could be no concomitant *redemption* on the part of the film audience. (Deacy, 2001: 98)

That said, not all superhero films feature protagonists devoid of a human element. Writing in 2001 Deacy noted a change in the tone of superhero comics at the time, observing that 'the last few years have conspicuously borne witness to a *humanization* of the comic book superhero' that had also found its way into some superhero films (Deacy, 2001: 149). This trend has only increased over the last two decades and further opens up the possibility that superhero films may have a previously undertheorized transcendent potential.

Although Deacy's study is quite film focused it is nevertheless useful for my purposes because many of the factors he identifies as helpful in creating a potentially redemptive film can be achieved through comic book narratives as well. Comic books, like films, can feature authentically human protagonists who—through confronting the evil and suffering of the world as well as their own human frailties and propensities toward sin—achieve redemption for themselves and serve as a redeeming figure for others.[26] Similarly, comic books can achieve a *film noir* aesthetic that enhances the redemptive potential of the protagonist.[27] Although the differences between comic books and film prohibit any direct application of a film-focused

[26] An analysis of these types of figures, specifically Captain America, Batman, and some of *Watchmen*'s protagonist will be included in the case studies that follow this section.
[27] Frank Miller's *Sin City* (Dark Horse Comics, 1991-1992) and *Batman Year One* (DC Comics, 1987) series, Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso's *100 Bullets* (Vertigo, 1999-2009), and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (DC Comics, 1987-1988) are some examples of comics that achieve a *noir* aesthetic.

theory like Deacy's, the similarities between the two media allow for some aspects of film theory to be easily adapted and applied to the comic book. Before doing this, it is important to review the medial overlap that film and comic books enjoy, as well as some of the medial peculiarities that limit the development of an approach that can apply equally to both media forms.

Comic Book and Film Medial Overlap and Differences

The overlap between comic books and film is extensive. Liam Burke goes so far as to claim that 'this overlap is greater than many of the media that filmmakers traditionally turned to for inspiration' (Burke, 2015: 170) while Blair Davis characterizes the two media as long-time allies and suggests that 'the blockbuster successes of various adaptations of Marvel and DC Comics superhero titles' has served as a catalyst for a 'growing area of scholarly interest' (Davis, 2017[a]: 7). Though both Davis and Burke outline the similarities between the media they are careful to note that these parallels are sometimes overblown.

Drew Morton, like both Davis and Burke, takes issue with the common claim that the comic book is—at its basic level—a film storyboard. Though he recognizes that the connection between comic books and storyboards is understandable because of their visible similarities, Morton claims that there are actually quite distinctive differences:

> Analyzing the difference between comics and cinematic storyboards, the panels of the comic are often interdependent images of space and time, featuring narrative text, and presented in unison. Storyboards (the composition of which can vary drastically based upon the artist and the pre-production staff) often lack narrative text and the legibility of comics. […] Essentially, storyboards are not legible in the same way comics are because they are not the ultimate, presented, result. […] [They are] incapable of telling a story in isolation. (Morton, 2017: 30)

Burke, like Morton, seems to dismiss what he refers to as 'the giddy proclamations of the storyboard analogy' while claiming that the 'separatist view is also limiting as it ignores the

deepening of the comic aesthetic in adaptations and related films' (Burke, 2015: 171). For my purposes, the storyboard analogy is unimportant as I am concerned only with the 'ultimate, presented, result' of both films and comic books. That said, I discuss it because it sheds light on how comic books and films are sometimes erroneously viewed as either completely separate or very similar. I, like Morton, Davis, and Burke, argue that comics and films overlap in many ways while suggesting that their differences are significant—especially the distinct ways panels and cinematic shots operate because of the way these operations influence audience interpretation, interaction, and responses.

One of the first (and most obvious) ways film shots and comic book panels differ has to do with each medium's general mode of production:

> [C]omic books are typically illustrated while film is a photographic art form, meaning that the former has its roots in the graphic arts while the latter has an ontological relationship to reality. Hence, it is easier for the former to be fantastic. (Morton, 2017: 5)

Though I agree with Morton's claim that a comic book panel (and the comic book the panels build) is better able to communicate the fantastic than a cinematic shot (and the film these shots create), I do so with some hesitation. My scepticism stems from the increasing role CGI plays in blurring the ontological relationship that film enjoys with reality. I touched on this complicated relationship earlier in this section and, though the current state of film still allows it to occupy a privileged space that is intrinsically linked to reality, I suspect that this will continue to change as film and cinematic modes of engagement continue to change.

Though I expect the ontological relationship between comic books and films to continue to converge, the state of each medium at the moment is such that a tenuous binary between reality and artistic expression can still be drawn. Morton uses the work of Bazin to establish this

binary in spite of the way filmic images are increasingly manipulated. His claims are worth quoting at length:

> Film, born out of advances in photography, has the unique ability—even when manipulated—to provide the viewer with an indexical tie to reality. As film theorist André Bazin notes in his seminal essay 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image,' photography and film both have an essential 'objective character' due to the fact that 'there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent' between the originating object and its reproduction. […] Comics, on the other hand, are rooted in the parodic tradition. Their representational mode is founded upon deformation and caricature, providing the reader with a feeling of artifice. This drawn interpretation, like painting, is translated by the viewer as being the product of a living agent who forms an image that, to comic theorist Pascal Lefèvre, has 'subjectivity … built into the work.' Essentially, live-action film is photographic while comics are iconographic. (Morton, 2017: 67)

So then, for Morton, the origin of a medium directly impacts the way a viewer or reader understands that medium's relationship to reality. Following Morton's logic, film—despite any way it is manipulated—will continue to enjoy a privileged relationship with reality while comics will continue to be connected with art-forms that hold reality at a distance. Although this may change in the future and is certainly open to debate given the increasing artifice of films, it does mean that currently a transcendental style focused on film and its apparently inherent connection to realism (like the one Bazin espoused) cannot be adapted to a comic book without many caveats.

The second major difference between comic book panels and cinematic shots, and one that hinders the development of a transcendental style that is easily applied to each medium, is related to time:

> [C]omic art relies on sequential snapshots of time—mobilized across the space of the page—to represent a narrative. Film, on the other hand, typically presents multiple shots of space individually, across time. In film, montage and classical film editing perform the work of spatiotemporal closure that is required of the reader in comics. (Morton, 2017: 5-6)

Interestingly, Morton connects the different ways comic books and films express time with their ontological relationship with reality (Morton, 2017: 121-122), but I argue that this particular difference has more far-reaching consequences. Not only does it influence the way a reader or viewer conceptualizes each medium's relationship to reality; it also influences the way a viewer or reader engages with the medium on a cognitive level:

> Groensteen describes the difference between how comics readers engage with panels versus how film viewers engage with shots: 'At the perceptive and cognitive levels the panel exists longer for the comics reader than the shot exists for a film spectator.' Comics readers experience a totality of images on a page rather than being shown each one separately in succession. Once a shot leaves the screen, film viewers cannot return to it, unlike the ability to refer back to earlier comics panels as one scans the page. In this way, the reader controls the pace of reading a comic while the editor controls the pace of film spectatorship. Film is therefore a time-based medium while comics are not. (Davis, 2017[a]: 32-33)

Davis' claim that comic books are not a 'time-based medium' is worded in a way that disregards the relationship—albeit unique—that comics do have with time. When read in context, it is clear that Davis does not actually think that comics have no relationship with time, they just do not have the same readily recognizable relationship with time that many films enjoy.

When Davis describes how films actually manipulate time it becomes clear that he recognizes the unique and important temporal qualities of comic books. Filmmakers have the privilege of controlling time: they can 'use editing to maintain or disrupt a feeling of time as it unfolds directly, be it through cross-cutting, a montage sequence, or following one scene with another taking place later the same day' (Davis, 2017[a]: 76). Conversely, comic book creators can influence how time is perceived but, ultimately, give up control over the reader's experience of narrative time 'since the reader controls how fast—and in what order—they experience the story and its imagery' (Davis, 2017[a]: 76-77). Comics' reader-driven relationship with time points to one of the main reasons a transcendental theory of film cannot be transplanted to the

comic book medium: the ways readers and viewers engage with films and comic books are radically different and the relationship each medium has with time is one of the central differences that lead to unique reader and viewer experiences—even in the case of high-fidelity adaptations.[28]

Not only do comic book readers control the pace of a comic book narrative,[29] but they also bear the weight of connecting disparate still-scenes to create a narrative. This type of creative reader participation is often hailed as one of the defining features of comic books and stems from their inability to express time in a filmic, literal way. Burke, drawing on the work of esteemed comic book and film theorists, creators, and directors, claims that 'the reader participation required to stimulate movement from one panel to the next is often celebrated as comics' defining feature' (Burke, 2015: 175).[30] Burke goes on to explain that

> cinema can also achieve a measure of participation, yet the reader contribution necessitated by comics is far greater than that of film. Furthermore, while both comics and cinema rely on montage, the co-presence of images in comics (as opposed to the sequential replacement of images in cinema) can achieve results that cinema cannot match and vice-versa. (Burke, 2015: 181)

Burke's claim is not a unique one: it is almost ubiquitous in comic studies. In addition to the scholars Burke used to establish the participatory nature of comic books, some of his peers—whose work I use throughout this thesis—have similarly hailed aspects of comics that are difficult to replicate in film and, as such, make comic books a uniquely participatory medium while also being careful to note that film has participatory qualities that comics cannot imitate.

---

[28] One of these high-fidelity adaptations will be the subject of a latter chapter, which will provide an opportunity to demonstrate just how significant medial differences become when exploring a superhero narrative transcendental style for each medium.

[29] I should note that (in non-theatrical settings) the pace of a film can be controlled by viewers through pausing, scene selection menus, rewinding, and fast-forwarding. That said, these practices tend to interrupt the narrative and are not a typical way of viewing films.

[30] Burke uses the work of Will Eisner, Scott McCloud, R.C. Harvey, and Theirry Groensteen to support his claim.

Interestingly, enhanced viewer involvement is instrumental for Schrader's transcendental style. He acknowledges that all types of film require some degree of audience participation due to the viewer's impulse to continue an on-screen action to completion: 'Such movement perceived on screen continues in our minds. We're hardwired for it. Even after the image of the running man is cut on screen, the viewer still imagines the runner completing his task' (Schrader, 2018: 3). That said, Schrader also suggests that transcendental style must use specific film techniques that can manipulate the viewer to take on a greater co-creative role in order to be effective: 'The long take demands a viewer involvement—pro or con. "Dead time" (*temps mort*) is predicated on the active viewer. It seems counter-intuitive to say that slow cinema requires more viewer involvement, but that is exactly the point' (Schrader, 2018: 9). For Schrader, a long take can create duration and 'duration can peel back the social veneer of an activity. Duration can invoke the Wholly Other' (Schrader, 2018: 6). In short, films always require viewer participation but (without utilizing specific filmic means to intentionally move the viewer toward more involvement) not enough to 'invoke the Wholly Other'. Comics do not run into this particular problem due to the way that they innately require high levels of audience participation. That said, comics creators cannot control the duration of a panel and, as such, cannot manipulate readers into engaging with particular panels in the same way that a filmmaker can through a well-placed and well-timed long take.

Morton, for instance, is very careful to note that both comic books and film require some sort of audience participation. That said, he clearly sees comics as a more participatory medium than film. For Morton, 'the reader of the comic, unlike the spectator of a film, is entered into the role of a collaborator (that is not to say that the spectator of a film is passive, just that spectatorial activity differs) with regard to digesting the panels individually, placing them into a

sequence, and inferring the spatiotemporal relationship between them' (Morton, 2017: 79). Similarly, Ian Hague claims that neither medium 'is somehow superior to the other' but that 'the positions in which those images stand relative to each other, and the ways in which they are experienced by the viewer, are very different' (Hague, 2012: 46). So then, though both film and comic books are participatory media, the type of participation comic books require from their readers is much more involved than that of films.

The way active consumer practices in both film and comic books complicate existing transcendent media frameworks will be explored later on in this chapter. First, I will provide a brief overview of integral audience studies theories that establish the active role of audiences across media that I have been taking for granted. I will then move on to illustrate how authorship and auteur theories, hermeneutics, semiotics, and intertextuality are indispensable tools for understanding how co-creative consumer practices work and why they should be considered when adapting and applying a transcendental style of either film or comic books. I will then use these tools to demonstrate how they make space for superhero narratives in transcendent media styles.

The Essential Role of the Active Audience

Though the active role of audience members across media is often assumed, this was not always the case. The way the role of the audience member is understood began to change across academia due to the work of pioneering theorists like Stuart Hall, John Fiske, and Henry Jenkins. Hall is credited with establishing cultural studies as a field and a large part of his legacy is connected to his refusal to contribute to the false hierarchy that makes a distinction between high culture (which is worth studying) and popular culture (which is not) (Hsu, 2017). While Hall

helped establish cultural studies, he arguably began modern audience studies. Instead of seeing culture as something handed down from the elites to educate and, perhaps, control the masses, Hall saw all parts of culture as sites rife with negotiation. He credited audiences with the ability to interact with, modify, subvert, and re-appropriate culture for their own ends (Hsu, 2017): '[S]ince there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can attempt to "pre-fer" [sic] but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter, which has its own conditions of existence' (Hall, 2001: 515). Hall's willingness to recognize the active role of audiences—especially regarding how political, racial, and class issues impacted audience members' relationships with culture—paved the way for other scholars, like John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, to bring audience studies from the periphery of cultural studies and related disciplines to the centre of film studies, game studies, and media studies.

Fiske, like Hall, asserts that audiences are active consumers whose background influences how they interpret any given piece of media. Like Hall, Fiske recognizes that media have preferred meanings that the creators are trying to communicate and, though these preferred meanings are typically related to dominant class structures, neither Fiske nor Hall believe that audiences are bound by them. In other words, 'even preferred meanings, which usually coincide with the perceptions of the dominant sections of society, must compete with and be seen in the context of other possible ways of seeing' (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 5). Though Fiske and Hartley write primarily about television, their observations are easily applicable to other types of media. Their description of how audience members interpret television is eloquent, thought-provoking, and still relevant today. As such, it is worth quoting at length:

> The way it [television] communicates with its audience can be likened to what happens if, when flicking through the pages of this book, you were to come across letters in print resembling your own name. All the other words escape your attention as your eye scans the fast-moving information, but your name is deeply imprinted on

> you: you are primed to recognize its familiar form even when you are unaware that you have been 'reading' the information. In the same way the television medium presents us with a continuous stream of images *almost all* of which are deeply familiar in structure and form. It uses codes which are closely related to those by which we perceive reality itself. It appears to be the natural way of seeing the world. It shows us not our names but our collective selves. (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 4)

The image that Fiske and Hartley paint with the above description beautifully illustrates the seeds of intertextuality that I will be using and exploring in much more detail further on in this section. Until then, suffice it to say that the way comic books and films communicate with their audiences allow them to include intertextual references that have religious parallels that can be read by audiences (with specific intertextual backgrounds) without any further effort.

Fiske openly acknowledges how Hall's work on the way audiences negotiate preferred textual meanings and produce dominant and oppositional readings of texts paved the way for his own understanding of audience members as socially situated subjects. For Fiske, each audience member is a social subject who 'lives in a particular social formation (a mix of class, gender, age, region, etc.), and is constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual. The[ir] subjectivity results from "real" social experience and from mediated or textual experience' (Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2010: 62). Though Fiske claims that Hall relies too much on 'class in relation to other social factors' he praises the value of Hall's work due to the way it moves toward recognizing the 'reader as the site of meaning' in interpretive pursuits (Fiske, 2010: 64-65). After Stuart Hall helped bring cultural studies into mainstream academia and John Fiske, relying heavily on Hall, helped establish modern audience studies, Henry Jenkins took their work and expanded on it to help create an academic landscape where fandom could not only be studied but participated in by academics across cultural and media studies.

Jenkins was selected to write an introduction for the 2nd edition of Fiske's *Television Culture* entitled 'Why Fiske Still Matters.' Though Jenkins is frank about his high esteem for

Fiske and is clearly part of Fiske's legacy, he recognizes that the massive changes in media landscapes make part of Fiske's work obsolete:

> Fiske embraced a model of reader resistance because he felt consumers were locked outside cultural production, but this model needs to be reframed for a world where many more people are producing and sharing media. The debate now centres on the terms of our participation, not whether spectatorship is active or passive. (Jenkins, 2010: xxxiii)

Jenkins' reframing of Fiske's model appears to be designed to create more space for fan production in light of technological changes centred primarily (but not exclusively) around computers and the internet. I suggest that Jenkins' reframing of Fiske's model is justified even in the absence of fan productions and technological advancements due to the general acceptance of productive consumption popularized by, in large part, Jenkins himself.

My work is focused on how certain types of narratives in films and comic books may create space for religious or transcendent interpretations among textual consumers, which means I am more interested in factors that influence meaning making than I am in fan textual production and practices or ethnographic case studies. That said, Jenkins' fan-centred work is still useful for two main reasons. First, Jenkins' work does not assume that a scholar has to be a distanced observer. Jenkins' years of work has created a hard-fought space for scholars, like me, to analyse their subject while reflecting on and integrating their own experiences with that subject (Jenkins and Hills, 2006: 16-17). Both Fiske's and Jenkins' work was unconventional when it was developed as neither theorist painted fans as deviant members of society. Jenkins continually attempts to dispel the often-unwarranted negative reputations attributed to fans. One way he goes about this is by repeatedly referring to himself as a fan (a practice he began when he wrote *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* in 1992). Joli Jenson,

commenting on the negative treatment of fans that Jenkins continually works to change, states that:

> Whether researchers are concerned with the media uses and gratifications, or the circulation of ideology, or the reasons for fandom, 'they' (viewers, consumers and fans) are seen as victims of forces that somehow cannot and will not influence 'us.' The commentator on fandom is protected by reason, or education or critical insight: thanks to these special traits, 'we' don't succumb to whatever it is we believe applies to 'them.' This is not only a dishonorable stance, individually, but it is a severely truncated basis for inquiry. It means that the perceived-to-be-deviant, exotic and dramatic, is studied with zeal, while the normal, everyday, and accepted is ignored. Little is known, for example, about the variety of ways people make meaning in everyday ways. (Jenson, 2001: 25)

Jenson's observation is a reminder of the elitism that can accompany fan studies if one is not careful. To avoid falling into that sort of elitism in this thesis I am following in the footsteps of Jenkins; I am outing myself as a fan.

Second, Jenkins' work takes audience participation for granted. He consistently demonstrates how the locus for meaning making lies not with the producer of a text, but with the consumer—even when that consumer is not actively engaged in the interpretive process, they still bear most of the work of interpretation. Jenkins clearly illustrates this point when he likens media meaning-making processes to the way students create meanings in a classroom setting:

> As a teacher, I may fantasize about being able to decide exactly what I want my students to know and to transmit that information to them with sufficient skill and precision so that every student in the room learns exactly what I want. But real-world education doesn't work that way. Each student pays attention to some parts of the lesson and ignores or forgets others. Each has their own motivations for learning. Previous understandings and experiences colour how they interpret my words. Some students may disregard my words altogether. There is a huge difference between education and indoctrination. Add to that fact that consumers don't sit down in front of their game consoles [television screens, computers, or comic books] to learn a lesson. Their attention is even more fragmented; their goals are even more personal; they aren't really going to be tested on what they learn. And they tend to dismiss anything they encounter in fantasy or entertainment that is not consistent with what they believe to be true about the real world. (Jenkins, 2006: 214)

Though Jenkins wrote the above quotation in defence of video games that were being blamed for youth violence, his observations can be equally applied to my own research—especially as it relates to intertextuality, which will be demonstrated later on in this section.

Part of the focus of this research is to shed some light on 'the variety of ways people make meaning in everyday ways' (Jenson, 2001: 25) while paying special attention to the role of religion and medium-specific factors in that meaning making. In order to accomplish this task, a robust methodology influenced by audience studies and built on a variety of theories related to textual consumption, interpretation, and production must be engaged. A key element of the relatively newly recognized active role of audience members is related to how meaning is derived from signs; therefore, any study of popular culture narratives should take into account the polysemic potential of a 'text' and engage with semiotic theories. Likewise, because the polysemic potential of a text can be shaped by intertextual references, the intertextual relationships between cultural narratives—relationships that are amplified and complicated in transmedia appropriations of superhero narratives—must be recognized and explored. Hence, any interpretive scheme used to evaluate transmedia superhero narratives and fan responses to these narratives must attend to issues surrounding authorship, audience, semiotics, and intertextuality.

As the title of my thesis suggests, this thesis is an exploration of meaning making that is especially concerned with the roles that religion and media may play in meaning-making processes. As such, special attention is given to possible implicit and explicit religious references, symbols, and narrative forms within the secular space of superhero narratives. The importance of these references, symbols, and forms is best understood through the lens of intertextuality coupled with audience studies, semiotics, authorship theory, and hermeneutics.

The method I apply approaches superhero narratives—especially those within comic books and films—with an overarching hermeneutic framework built on the work of both Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Both Ricoeur's and Gadamer's work already contain traces of auteur theory, audience theory, semiotics, and intertextuality. However, in light of the claims of audience studies theorists like Fiske and Jenkins—both of whom treat audience members as active agents of not only meaning production but, in some cases, extra-textual production—these elements need to be incorporated more fully. Therefore, the hermeneutic frameworks of Ricoeur and Gadamer will be combined with the work of Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles S. Peirce, Roman Jakobson, Umberto Eco, Valentin Voloshinov, Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, and cultural theorists such as Will Brooker and Lotte Bailyn. Additionally, the work of comic theorist and practitioner Scott McCloud will be utilized throughout this chapter as McCloud often, apparently unintentionally, touches on semiotics, audience theory, and auteur theory.

Gadamer and Ricoeur: A Brief Overview

The methodologies of both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur are most suited to strictly literary texts. Therefore, both Ricoeur's and Gadamer's methods are valuable for, but not entirely applicable to, the typical media (namely comic books and films) that house superhero narratives. That said, the methods of both Ricoeur and Gadamer serve as appropriate starting points because their hermeneutic frameworks problematize authorship while treating readers as active contributors of meaning.

Gadamer, for instance, acknowledges the role readers have in determining the meaning of any text. He recognizes the preconceptions (sometimes denoted by the pejorative term

'prejudices') that all people carry with them. Far from perceiving these preconceptions as hindrances, Gadamer suggests that they play an 'essential role in all acts of understanding' (Green, 2005: 399). For Gadamer, these preconceptions make up, in part, what he terms 'the horizon' of the reader; essentially, Gadamer suggests that the writer and interpreter of any text have a shared role whereby the act of understanding fuses the horizons, or world-views, of both participants (Green, 2005: 399).

Ricoeur, building on Gadamer, suggests that the locus of interpretation is language and/or dialogue. He then connects this to self-understanding by positing that self-dialogue is the beginning of all understanding and, like all other forms of dialogue, requires interpretation (Ricoeur, 2007[a]: 34). Essentially, Ricoeur argues that since people's understanding of their place in their already subjective worldview is itself subjective, it follows that it is impossible for any reader to read and understand a text exactly the way the so-called author may have intended; and it would remain impossible even if both the author and reader occupy the same historical and geographic location. Once something is written, it is freed from the worldview of the writer to be received into the worldview of the reader. In some ways this is similar to Gadamer's theory of blending horizons—Ricoeur, like Gadamer, recognizes the various horizons of the reader and author, but unlike Gadamer, Ricoeur refuses to allow these horizons to blend. This is because, for Ricoeur, the act of writing distances what is written from the author; it renders the text autonomous, making it impossible to discern the intention of the author from analysing the text (2007[b]: 83). If Ricoeur's premises are accepted, it follows that trying to discern any sort of truth about the author from the text is futile—as such, a new task has to be formulated.

For Ricoeur, this new task is to interpret the proposed world (the world in front of the text) that the text makes available to the reader (2007[b]: 86). This proposed world is one that a

reader takes over, one that a reader can inhabit and 'project one of [their] own most possibilities [onto]' (Ricoeur, 2007[b]: 86). Ricoeur suggests that this proposed world is the only hermeneutic pursuit that takes ideology critique seriously, as it accounts for the subjectivity of both the author and the reader; the world created by the author is distanced from the author and changed by the reader because of differing subjective worldviews.

Ricoeur's and Gadamer's hermeneutic models are especially suited to a study of superhero narratives that seriously considers the role of active audiences. This is because they recognize the audience's role in determining the meaning of a text and, as such, contain traces of contemporary authorship and audience theories. Ricoeur's treatment of the text as autonomous is analogous to Michel Foucault's author function and Roland Barthes' notion of the author as scriptor. Additionally, the audience-focused nature of both Ricoeur's and Gadamer's models open their frameworks up to the work of semiologists like Barthes and Voloshinov—both of whom locate meaning in social contexts to some degree (Barthes proposes that preconceived notions may determine the image a sign produces in the mind of its beholder (Barthes, 2007) and Voloshinov suggests that meaning is intimately connected to ideology and socio-economic factors (Barker, 1989)). Furthermore, Gadamer's recognition of preconceptions as essential components of understanding parallels some of the core underlying ideas that make up the intertextual theories of Bakhtin and Kristeva. Therefore, a hermeneutic framework built on the work of both Ricoeur and Gadamer is especially suited to be combined with auteur, semiology, and intertextuality theories to create a method that adequately addresses the many complexities inherent in any study of religion in popular culture, especially one that deals with superhero narratives and the hybrid comic book form.[31]

[31] The main complexities I deal with have to do with authorship and the way audiences interact with texts.

Authorship and Auteur Theories

Superhero narratives featuring characters who have existed, in some cases, for upwards of eighty years magnify already existent complications regarding authorship and audiences. Comic books are rarely created by a sole author; they often involve three to five creative collaborators per single comic book issue. Similarly, most commercial films are created by large production teams that go far beyond a director, producer, or screenwriter. Moreover, many superhero narratives feature multiple characters created by previous comic book artists and writers; if these creators were credited on each issue or filmic representation, comic book covers and Blu-ray cases would be so full of names there would not be room for much else. Then, of course, there are the editors. Editors often hold the final say when it comes to comic book narratives and, as such, exercise considerable creative control over many, especially major, characters. When superhero narratives are appropriated by other companies and are transferred to other media, notions of authorship are further complicated. When characters, worlds, and narratives change authorial hands, what imprints of the 'original' author and/or creator are left and which are replaced and/or lost?

The notion of traditional authorship has been under attack for decades. In the 1960s, theorists like Barthes and Foucault problematized the notion of authorship for novels. More recently, comic book scholar Will Brooker applied the theories of Foucault and Barthes to the Batman character. Essentially, Brooker applies Foucault's 'author function' and Barthes' notion of scriptor to explore the many versions of Batman while also investigating fan involvement in authoring popular comic book characters.

Building on Brooker's methodology, my framework will also use the work of both Foucault and Barthes. Foucault's author function problematizes the notion of authorship as a creative enterprise; for Foucault, authorship serves as a consumerist method of differentiation (Foucault, 1977). Essentially, attaching a creative 'work' to an author's name serves to differentiate the piece from other, similar, pieces. As Brooker has shown, Foucault's model is applicable to narratives featuring comic book superheroes (Brooker, 2012). To claim that a superhero who has been moulded by dozens, and possibly hundreds, of creative teams has a singular or even just a few authors seems preposterous, and yet, this phenomenon is a common one. Comic book fans will talk about the 'Batmen' of Frank Miller, Grant Morrison, David Finch, Jeph Loeb, Jim Lee, Gary Frank, Brian Bolland, Brian Azzarello, and so on—even though none of these authors or artists are solely responsible for the character. Their names serve to differentiate one version of Batman from other, sometimes only marginally different, versions.

Some of the time—likely because of the collaborative nature of creating comic books and superhero narratives—the person, or persons, an audience credits with authorship of a single narrative can be diverse. In his 2012 book *Hunting The Dark Knight: Twenty-First Century Batman*, Brooker records the results of a survey he conducted where he asked respondents to assign authorship of the Batman film *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) to as many authors as they would like (2012: 37-38). Perhaps expectedly, the results were varied; 97 percent of respondents identified Nolan as author, 43 percent credited the late actor Heath Ledger, 33 percent credited the actor Christian Bale, 87 percent credited story writer David S. Goyer, 88 percent credited screenplay writer Jonathan Nolan, and 48 percent credited comic book artist, writer, and co-creator of the Batman character Bob Kane with authorship (Brooker, 2012: 37-38). The results of the above survey suggest that the way audiences assign authorial credit is not

as straightforward as traditional theories of authorship appear to propose. Brooker, applying Foucault's author function theory and using Nolan's rise to fame from obscurity as an example, suggests that authorial credit may have as much to do with marketing as actual authorial involvement (2012).

Brooker also addresses the many creative imprints the Batman character carries by applying Barthes' theory of authorship. Essentially, Barthes claims that traditional notions of authorship, which invest the author with singular creative power over a narrative, are insufficient. Instead, Barthes advocates a notion of scriptor, whereby an author has creative, but limited, power and strings together ideas that are already present (2007: 82). Barthes grounds his theory in structuralism, and his claims are paralleled by other literary theorists, like Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov suggests that 'literature is made from literature, not from reality' and that 'self expression in literature is something that has never existed' (1975: 10).

Interestingly, many comic book fans seem to have internalized a conception of authorship that fits well with both Barthes and Todorov. Brooker's survey results demonstrate that fans who did credit Nolan with authorship, while not using explicitly Barthesian or Todorovian terms, seemed to treat him as a scriptor rather than an author:

> The notion of Nolan's recycling and assembly of existing texts into a new amalgam fits into an established mode of comic book authorship, whereby 'authorship' lies in the skill of the recycling; the fresh twist on old material, the originality of the selection, and the talent with which the familiar pieces are combined in a new arrangement. (Brooker, 2012: 41)

The expectation that authors of longstanding characters should be aware of and, to some extent, use previous material is further evidenced by the praise fans give to authors who show comic book canon awareness, the outrage fans direct towards authors who ignore such histories, and the common practice of finding 'Easter eggs' (small intertextual references) within a narrative.

It should be noted that Barthes' work has a number of similarities with that of Todorov, but noticeable differences as well. Barthes, for instance, makes a distinction between what he terms 'Texts' and 'works,' whereas Todorov does not make such a distinction (Barthes, 2007: 81-87). For Barthes, a 'work' is something to be consumed, something with a true meaning to be determined by employing interpretive methodologies. Conversely, a 'Text' does not have a single deducible meaning and is not an object to be consumed. Barthes' theory of 'works,' unlike his conception of the 'Text,' allows for what Todorov would term 'self expression'.

According to Barthes the 'Text' 'decants the work [. . .] from its consumption' before ultimately recuperating that 'Text' 'as play, task, production, [and] practice' (2007: 85). Barthes summarizes the effect of this process in the following way:

> This means that the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice (2007: 85).

Barthes' theories differ from both Gadamer's and Ricoeur's because of the distinction made between 'works' and 'Texts'—a differentiation I, like Gadamer and Ricoeur, do not share. That said, Barthes' notion of the 'Text' is closely related to both Gadamer's and Ricoeur's notions of literature.

Both Gadamer and Ricoeur grant readers power and agency. While Gadamer suggests that meaning is derived from the horizons of both the author and the reader, Ricoeur claims that the reader determines all meaning regardless of so called 'authorial' intention. Barthes, perhaps unintentionally, parallels Ricoeur on this point when he suggests that an author's private life is largely irrelevant (Thody and Piero, 2011: 104). Derrida, however, appears to take the middle ground in this debate; he, like Gadamer, claims that authorial intention has a place but goes on to suggest that the function of authorial intention does not include governing meaning (Collins and

Mayblin, 2011: 86). This is because Derrida—like Ricoeur and Barthes— claims that writing can be separated from the context in which it was written (Collins and Mayblin, 2011: 86). For theorists like Derrida, Barthes, and Ricoeur, the context surrounding the reader is a far more important factor in determining meaning than the context that surrounded the author when a text was written. Barthes further parallels Ricoeur (again, perhaps unintentionally) by claiming that, unlike a 'work,' a 'Text can be read without its father's guarantee; the restoration of the intertext paradoxically abolishes inheritance. It is not that the Author cannot "return" in the Text, in his text, but he does so, one might say, as a guest' (Barthes, 2007: 85). By granting the reader the ability to determine meaning, Barthes, Ricoeur, Gadamer, and Derrida all imbue the reader with varying measures of creative power. The reader becomes, in a somewhat limited sense, a co-creator of the narrative.

Barthes expresses the role of the reader beautifully when he likens reading a piece of literature to playing a score of music, claiming that 'the Text is a little like a score of this new kind: it solicits from the reader a practical collaboration' (Barthes, 2007: 86). This analogy is similar to Ricoeur's model in that it grants the reader/player creative power; like a musician approaching a score, each reader brings something unique to a piece of literature. However, Barthes' analogy differs from Ricoeur's and is more closely aligned with Gadamer's work as it still grants some creative power to the author. The composer of the score still determines what is meant to be played, just as the author still determines what is meant to be read. The reader and player simply determine how the piece is read and played. In this way, Barthes' analogy of the act of reading is similar to Gadamer's blending of horizons.

Interestingly, McCloud, despite his non-academic creative practitioner approach, parallels Barthes, Ricoeur, Gadamer, and Derrida in his specifically comic book-centred work.

Barthes, Ricoeur, and Gadamer all imbue the reader of a text with creative power by crediting the reader—not just the author—with determining the meaning of a text. By doing this, they make the reader, to some extent, a co-creator of the narrative. McCloud, focusing on the comic book specifically, takes this one step further; he suggests that the structure of the comic book requires the reader to take on a more substantial co-creative labour than other types of texts (McCloud, 1993). McCloud's work also parallels (perhaps unintentionally) the work of Wolfgang Iser who claims that 'the text pushes the reader in certain directions and the reader fills in the gaps left in the text' (Sim and Van Loon, 2009: 83). McCloud, utilizing language specifically applicable to the comic book medium, claims that the gutter (the white space that separates each image-containing panel) literally requires the reader to fill in the blanks; the panels contain parts of the story and the reader fills in the rest of the key details (McCloud, 1993: 63–68).[32] Whether or not McCloud was aware of it at the time, his argument serves as a comic book-centred variation of Iser's theory. A more detailed analysis of the way the structure of the comic book enhances the co-creative potential of the text is conducted later in this chapter and is revisited in the final case study of this thesis.

When taken in conjunction with Foucault's author function theory the role of the reader as a creative collaborator with the so-called author of a text through active co-creative consumption becomes particularly interesting. Is it possible that the act of attributing authorship to any given person(s) may influence the way a viewer or audience member consumes and produces meaning from a text? Would a viewer's choice to attribute authorship to Heath Ledger, as some did in Brooker's case study, affect the way that viewer produces meaning from *The*

[32] McCloud has published numerous books focusing on the production and reception of comics. He writes as a practitioner with a theoretical interest and, as such, differs from the academic theorists I primarily use. That said, his work is valuable on its own accord and becomes especially valuable when buffered by the work of scholarly theorists.

Dark Knight? Is it possible that a superhero fan's choice (however unintentional it may be) to ascribe to traditional auteur theory may affect the very way that fan consumes most popular culture?

These sorts of questions serve an essential purpose—they demonstrate the importance of including auteur theory in an analysis that, in some ways, subverts the very notion of the existence of an auteur. If audience members, and fans especially, approach these narratives through an auteurist lens, the influence of auteurism as it relates to the production of meaning must be explored. The importance of auteurism in audience consumption will become especially apparent when it is viewed through an intertextual lens; an approach that will be explored more thoroughly in the intertextuality section of this methodology. Suffice it to say for the moment that the production of meaning can be a complicated process that is related not only to audience consumption, but also to auteurist production and the marketing that makes auteurism possible. It is evident that studying transmedia superhero narratives requires a combination of approaches that focus on the multiple aspects of the relationship between producer, text, and audience.

Semiotics and Comic Book Narratives

Barthes' textual theories go beyond dealing with issues of authorship and readership; he was also a prolific semiotician. Arguably, a textual analysis would be incomplete without paying serious attention to semiotics since the field, put very simply, is the study of signs and their meanings. The importance of this approach is amplified when it comes to comic books, as they not only deal with symbolic words but also with various types of images. In this section I use the work of Saussure, Peirce, Eco, Jakobson, Barthes, and Voloshinov to illustrate how any

narrative, especially a narrative that features historically, and sometimes politically, situated superheroes, can lend itself to multiple interpretations.

Many semiologists root their theories in two major parts of Saussure's conception of the sign: namely, his assertion that the sign is arbitrary and his description of the linguistic sign as something that 'unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression that it makes on our sense' (Saussure, 1985: 36). Additionally, these arbitrary relationships expressed in parole (single acts of speech) are located in a greater codified system of language that Saussure terms 'langue' (Saussure, 1985: 29–32). It should be noted that Saussure's use of 'arbitrary' is contextualized: 'The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker [. . .]; [rather], it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified' (Saussure, 1985: 38). The arbitrary nature of the sign makes the linguistic system both mutable and immutable. The arbitrary signified requires continuity in order for the language system to function. Interestingly, this 'principle of continuity' both cancels linguistic freedom while necessarily implying change and 'varying degrees of shifts in the relationship between the signified and the signifier' (Saussure, 1985: 46). The continuity of the linguistic system roots meaning in history, geography, and, therefore, subjectivity. How a person approaches and receives a sign is rooted in the linguistic system through which the reader or viewer communicates—a system that is both continuous and variable, and that is, in many respects, linked to the reader's or viewer's historical and geographic location. This socio-historical location is, in turn, heavily influenced by both religious and secular worldviews and institutions. It then follows that readers with varying socio-historical locations and worldviews would presumably interpret any given sign differently.

Peirce's work is particularly relevant when considering the possibility of multiple interpretations; this is because of his focus on unlimited semiosis. According to Robert E. Innis, 'Peirce saw semiosis as "unlimited" or "infinite" in principle, a point which Umberto Eco has taken up and made one of the keys to his synthesis of semiotic theory' (Innis, 1985: 1). Peirce's basic theory of the sign is similar to Saussure's:

> A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (Peirce,1985: 5)

Peirce's interpretant echoes Saussure's 'psychological imprint of the sound' and is key to Peirce's theory of potentially unlimited or infinite semiosis. The interpretant, as a tertiary sign, has the potential to stand as a type of first sign and thus begin over the semiological cycle; this creates the potential for a cycle that could continue endlessly.

Eco's work on the metaphor is closely related to Peirce's reflections on the potential for unlimited semiosis. According to Eco, 'a metaphor can be invented because language, in its process of unlimited semiosis, constitutes a multidimensional network of metonymies, each of which is explained by a cultural convention rather than by an original resemblance' (1985: 260-61). Essentially, the arbitrary and possibly unlimited signifying potential of words differentiated and related to each other by a 'multidimensional network of metonymies' enables metaphor to exist. Just as, according to Saussure, 'the bond between the signifier and signified [which, in their totality, make up the linguistic sign] is arbitrary' (1985: 37) so, for Eco, the bond between the parts of metaphor are also arbitrary. According to Innis, the arbitrary nature of the sign [and the metaphor, which is essentially a deliberate sign made of linguistic signs] 'is an important

point of intersection between Peircean and Saussurian semiotics, and [. . .] Barthes [. . .]. Semiosis, once again, points towards subjectivity' (Innis, 1985: 27).

Jakobson's work also points towards subjectivity and, hence, a multiplicity of meaning. Jakobson illustrates six factors that determine the function of linguistic communication in the diagram below (1985: 150).

Context

Addresser.....Message.....Addressee

Contact

Code

Jakobson's model demonstrates that, in communication, any message must pass through contextual, medial, contact, and codic factors before reaching the 'addressee'. For Jakobson, 'diversity lies not in a monopoly of some one of these several functions but in a different hierarchical order of functions' (1985: 151); the context, linguistic code, mode of contact and medium of transmission all play an important role.

Barthes' textual theories also engage in the possibility of multiple interpretations. He claims that 'the meaning of a text can be nothing but the plurality of its systems, its infinite (circular) transcribability' (Barthes, 2007: 84). Barthes' theories, especially those of the 'Text,' seem to adhere to general principles of potentially infinite (or, at the very least, multiple) interpretations. For Barthes, 'the Work itself functions as a general sign [one that can be interpreted through a hermeneutic framework to determine a true or correct meaning]' whereas a 'Text' engages in a notion of play—'the engendering of the perpetual signifier (in the fashion of

a perpetual calendar)' (Barthes, 2007: 84). Barthes treats the 'Text' as something that is subject to interpretation and something that contains a multitude of signifiers when he suggests that 'the plurality of the Text depends [. . .] on what we might call the stereographic plurality of the signifiers which weave it' (2007: 84). I align myself with Barthes' claim that the 'Work' 'functions as a general sign,' but move on to suggest that all signs, even general ones, are potentially perpetual signifiers. So then, for the purposes of this thesis, I treat all general texts as Barthes treats his conception of the 'Text'. It follows that I treat superhero narrative texts and religious texts as 'metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, [and] cross references [which] coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy' (Barthes, 2007: 84).

Barthes did not limit his theories to traditional texts; he also theorized about images, which makes his work particularly suited for application to film and comic book media. Barthes claims that 'all images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a "floating chain" of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others' (1985: 197). Barthes' image theory, like Gadamer's hermeneutic framework, grants power to both the creator of the image and viewer of the image. The creator may make the image but, because of the polysemic nature of the image, the reader or viewer controls what individual meaning is gleaned from that image.

Polysemic images are present across many forms of popular media; this is especially true of superhero narratives as they primarily appear in comic books and films, which are both highly pictorial forms of media. As mentioned earlier, the role of comic book and film creators are more closely related to that of a scriptor than that of a singular traditional 'author'. Creators who work on stories featuring a well-known superhero script together previous parts of a character's history and add new material, or a new twist on old material, to create a new narrative. This makes superhero narratives truly, as Barthes would say, 'metonymic; the activity of associations,

contiguities, [and] cross references' (2007: 84). This means that superhero comic book and film narratives are full of symbolic potential and are especially open to a multiplicity of interpretations.

The way a superhero fan interprets a narrative may be related to how they approach the various parts of the story. A superhero fan's ability to discern recycled material from new material is dependent on the fan's knowledge of a character's history. The parts of a scripted narrative that a fan recognizes may influence how they engage with and interpret the text. If one of the scripted parts of the story has already influenced a fan's perception of a character, it may mean that that particular part of the narrative will stand out and influence the rest of the story. It then follows that superhero fans who have varying knowledge of a character's textual history may interpret any given narrative differently depending on how they relate to the various scripted parts of the narrative.

In *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1989), Martin Barker recognizes the polysemic nature of comic books. Throughout his book he maintains that his 'serious point is that in the face of such a multiplicity of possible "meanings" we need a theory and a method to advise us on how to look at such [stories]' (Barker, 1989: 13). Although my goal is not the same as Barker's—I do not intend to develop a theory that assists or directs readers in their meaning making—it is similar in that I hope to develop a methodology that assists in accounting for such a multiplicity of meanings. In the remaining chapters of this thesis I hope to accomplish this goal by investigating the role of contextual factors in meaning making through four case studies that examine the role of a specific cultural factor that is intimately connected to other cultural factors—namely, religion. Before I embark on these case studies further investigation into the

polysemic potential of superhero narratives, the role of intertextuality and medial factors in meaning-making processes must be completed.

In *Hunting the Dark Knight*, Brooker examines both the potential for multiple meanings in Batman narratives and the reasons why some meanings prevail (2012: xv). Brooker not only suggests that the character of Batman lends itself to multiple interpretations but goes on to claim that 'to make Batman into one thing [. . .] is a violation. To reduce him to a single dark dimension [as is sometimes attempted] is to imprison him' (2012: xiv). He proposes treating Batman as multiple, as 'an amalgam of all different forms, stories and histories' related to the character (Brooker, 2012: 151). Brooker draws on the work of Umberto Eco to strengthen his point. Eco, writing on Superman and myth, elucidates the challenges of writing new stories for a mythic archetype like Superman or, in Brooker's case, Batman. According to Eco, mythic characters like Superman (and Batman) have 'immutable characteristics' and an 'irreversible destiny' (2004: 147). For Eco this means that mythical characters and heroes like Superman must embody 'a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us' (2004: 148). Even though Brooker advocates for multiple 'Batmen', he recognizes the overarching 'brand' (which he identifies as a range brand) of Batman and the archetype into which Batman and many other superheroes fit. These archetypes serve to unite the multiplicity of stories, images, and symbols related to any given character. Appropriating Saussure's semiotic theory, Brooker goes on to suggest the following:

> Each individual story and iteration [of Batman] is an expression of the archetype, a part of the whole; the myth is the langue from which each story is the parole, and each new narrative contributes to the whole, building our many faceted sense—partly a shared sense, partly entirely individual—of what Batman is. (2012: 153)

Brooker connects the partly shared sense of Batman, which may influence a person's individual interpretation of the character, to branding and overarching ideologies.[33] I suggest that the horizon of a reader, influenced by the religious or secular history of that reader, will partially determine what signifieds he or she picks up on and what stories resonate with him or her. In other words, a person's individual perception of a character, and how that perception relates to a broader shared sense of that character, may be influenced by a person's cultural worldview, religious and secular experiences, and textual history.

Similarly, Barthes claims that 'the number of readings of the same lexical unit or lexia (of the same image) varies according to individuals' before moving on to clarify that 'the variation in readings is not, however, anarchic; it depends on the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—invested in the image' (1985: 201–02). For Barthes, 'it is as though the image presented itself to the reading of several different people who can perfectly well co-exist in a single individual: The one lexia mobilizes different lexicons' (1985: 201-202). The importance of the lexicon as it relates to identity cannot be understated. Barthes defines a lexicon as 'a portion of the symbolic plane (of language) which corresponds to a body of practices and techniques' (1985: 202). He further suggests that 'there is a plurality and a co-existence of lexicons in one and the same person, the number and identity of these lexicons forming in some sort a person's idiolect' (Barthes, 1985: 202). I propose that lexicons form due to past experiences and cultural environments. Hence, a person's past experiences with religion, spirituality, and/or religious institutions may form his or her idiolect. I connect the lexicon to the underlying ideology—often influenced by religion and/or religious institutions—that influences

[33] The current dark and gritty image of Batman is strengthened, and was partly formed, by contrasting the modern Batman to the 1960s and 1990s camp versions of the character. This contrast is part of a larger hetero-normative perception of masculine heroism (Brooker, 2012: 108-127).

the worldview or, as Gadamer phrases it, the horizon of each individual. Additionally, the previous texts (religious or otherwise) that a person has read—their intertextual place in the world—may also influence their idiolect.

The work of Voloshinov is invaluable when considering the way context influences meaning. According to Barker, 'Voloshinov argues that meaning is not fixed in words [. . .] "the meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context," and "there are as many meanings of a word as there are contexts of its usage"' (1989: 271). For Voloshinov, the meaning of a word is influenced by both its past contextual uses and its current ones: 'Language is not just a re-run of its past. Every use transforms the word into a new theme, by making a new "bridge" to a new hearer' (Barker, 1989: 272). According to Barker, Voloshinov not only locates the meaning of words in social contexts but also claims that the 'first function of language is to establish social relations between human beings in society' (1989: 264). This relational aspect of language impacts the fluidity of its interpretations:

> To understand a person's utterance means to orient oneself with respect to it, to find the proper place for it in the corresponding context. For each word of the utterance that we are in process of understanding we, as it were, lay down a set of our own answering words. (Voloshinov qtd in Barker, 1989: 264)

Voloshinov claims that the meaning of a word is not socially or ideologically innocent. Words have 'themes' that 'are meanings with social purposes attached to them that have been sedimented into talk' (Barker, 1989: 267). These themes are related to 'speech genres' that are socially 'established ways of talking to each other' (Barker, 1989: 267). Speech genres exist for geographic locations, social events and various types of media (Barker, 1989: 267). The rules of social engagement at an academic conference are different than those of a sports game. Similarly, the language used by an academic journal is markedly different from that of a tabloid newspaper.

Established speech genres influence how a person determines the meaning of an utterance. The phrase ‘is it dead?’, for instance, can mean very different things depending on the context. If the question were to be asked by a pub server to a patron with some of their drink left, it would likely be an inquiry as to whether or not the patron was finished with his or her drink. If, however, the question was to be asked by someone looking at a motionless animal it would presumably mean ‘is that animal dead?’ In this case, the history of the word ‘dead’ influences both circumstances but has been modified significantly in one. In the case of the animal, the word ‘dead’ has maintained the traditional connotation that refers to the absence of life. In the case of the drink the word ‘dead’ has still retained its history—consider the use of ‘he’s/she’s dead to me’ in popular culture as synonymous to ‘I am finished with that person; I have no use for him/her’—but has been modified to fit a new situational use of the word.

Comic books, like other media, seem to have their own speech genres. For the purposes of this research I will apply Voloshinov’s ‘speech genres’ not only to words but also to images. The types of images found in a comic book are often different from what one would normally expect to find in the Louvre. That said, it is important to note that speech and image genres are malleable.[34] Familiarity with these speech and image genres, combined with the themes a reader attaches to various words and images, will very likely influence a reader’s interpretation of a comic book superhero narrative.

Just as different forms of media have established themes and speech genres, so too do religions. Different religious traditions require members of their communities to become aware (often through religious education and exposure) of images, symbols, and phrases connected to that tradition that have different meanings outside of that tradition. Take, for example, the

[34] The Louvre’s 2009 comics exhibit entitled ‘The Louvre invites the comics’ speaks to the fluidity of speech and image genres.

Christian tradition of communion; the ritual is normally preceded by a Biblical reading, often from the books of Luke, John, or Matthew. These readings typically include verses like the following:

> While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body'. Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you'. (Matthew, 26:26-27 New International Version)

The language used in these verses could be mistaken, outside of a church context, to be cannibalistic, but the themes and speech genres attached to the verses ensure that congregants understand the religious, salvific meaning of them. Additionally, the actual elements of communion—broken bread (or crackers or wafers), wine (or juice) in one or many cups—are not notable on their own. Inside a Christian context, however, a congregant familiar with the spiritual weight and symbolic capital of the elements would see them as much more than what they appear to be on the surface. When these elements are seen in a film or comic book a Christian person may see them differently than somebody who has had minimal exposure to a Christian religious tradition. So then, a person's comic book, film, and religious intertextual history, in addition to their cultural context, may influence how they approach, read, and, therefore, interpret superhero narratives.

Intertextuality

The role of audience members, readers, and viewers as potential co-creators of any narrative, along with both the potential for infinite semiosis and the function of context in meaning making, may partially account for multiple interpretations, especially religious interpretations, of superhero narratives. That said, none of the theoretical work evaluated and

utilized thus far—when taken on its own—explicitly accounts for why such variances occur in superhero narrative interpretations. In order to explore why some superhero fans see religious characters in their favourite superheroes while others see the epitome of secular humanism, theories of intertextuality (which have already been hinted at throughout this chapter) must be engaged with more fully.[35]

Drawing primarily on Kristeva and Bakhtin, while using the work of Barthes, Voloshinov, and Derrida to support my argument, I propose that a person's intertextual reading of a text is largely related to their religious or secular personal and socio-historical background. A person, religious or not, who has grown up in a Western nation with a largely Christian history may well have been exposed to more direct and indirect Christian texts that someone growing up in a different social, geographic, and historic location. Hence, he or she may recognize symbolism related to Christianity more readily than a person from a different background. Conversely, somebody who is well versed in the Hindu Mahabharata and Ramayana epics may be better suited to recognize Hindu epic motifs than someone, religious or not, from a largely Christian Western nation. I argue that this intertextual place determines a person's, to use Gadamer's term, 'horizon' and, as such, influences how a narrative—especially one that contains characters with religious overtones—is received by any given reader.

Essentially, I claim that a person's textual history determines their interpretive textual future. Not only do I propose that understanding is rooted in an individual's intertextual history but, to complicate matters, I also draw on the work of intertextual and semiological theorists who suggest that individual texts are inherently intertextual; a claim that, if true, could amplify the already present potential of unlimited semiosis.

---

[35] For the sake of this section I treat the word 'texts' in a very broad way that includes cultural hegemonies.

Barthes, commenting on intertextuality, claims that a 'Text' 'has no fixed true meaning, rather it has associations, [and] connections. It exists as a combination of other texts: of other words, it is "intertextual" through and through' before moving on to make an even bolder claim: 'It only comes into existence through the work of reception that it solicits' (2007: 81). Because of the intertextuality of any given text, the authority of the singular author, if he or she exists, is lost. The author becomes what Barthes terms a scriptor of a 'Text' because, for Barthes, a 'Text' is 'entirely woven of [anonymous and irrecoverable] quotations, references, echoes [and] cultural languages' (2007: 84). If Barthes' claim is accepted, it follows that a person's familiarity—or lack thereof—with the previous uses of these 'quotations without quotation marks' will influence how that person receives the text (Barthes, 2007: 84).

Bakhtin's conceptualizations of heteroglossia and utterance, along with Kristeva's intertextual work, can be related to and combined with Barthes' theories of intertextuality and authorship. This marriage of theories can potentially develop a more nuanced understanding of intertextuality and, as Amber Davisson and Paul Booth have pointed out, uncover ideological viewpoints that are possibly present in texts.[36] Bakhtin's theory of language is dependent on his notion of the 'utterance,' which is a complete thought that can stand on its own while pulling 'its meaning from multiple locations at once' (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 70). Like all signs, the syntagm that forms the utterance derives meaning from difference; an utterance 'cannot exist without other utterances' (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 70). Additionally, utterances only become complete 'through both the author's voice and the contextual situation in which the utterance exists' (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77).

[36] In Davisson and Booth's 'Intertextuality, Parody, and Polyphony in Pepsi's® 2009 Presidential Inauguration Campaign' (2010), Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theories are combined to 'create a theoretical framework for understanding how the ideological viewpoints inherent in the two ad campaigns reflect on one another' (68).

The meaning that an utterance derives from contact with other utterances produces what Bakhtin terms ‘heteroglossia’, which is a ‘stratification that takes place when multiple words from multiple languages act towards a single object’ (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77). For Davisson and Booth, heteroglossia implies that ‘meaning is thus not inherent to any texts; [rather] the echoes present within the utterance work together to create meaning for each individual listener’ (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77). Essentially, Davisson and Booth, utilizing Bakhtin, locate meaning in an intertextual web of echoes and traces. Similarly, Brooker utilizes Bakhtin’s concepts to problematize the legitimacy of any ‘original’ version of Batman and, in turn, discredit any notions of ‘fidelity’ to this non-existent original (Brooker, 2012: 47–48).

Davisson and Booth go on to locate Kristeva’s intertextual theories in Bakhtin’s work:

> This heteroglossia inherent in the utterance was critical to Kristeva’s (1977/1980) conceptualization of intertextuality. Listeners and speakers negotiate the meaning of any discrete utterance by locating it within the context of an exchange and with a larger social/historical context (Bakhtin 1935/1981, 1979/1986). (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77)

Davisson and Booth connect this with Kristeva’s claim that words and phrases, like utterances, lack inherent meanings. Meaning, for Kristeva, ‘is determined along two axes’ (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77). These axis parallel Jakobson’s model of meaning as they focus on the context that influences the meaning of an exchange between an addresser and addressee. The horizontal axis corresponds to the immediate context in which the addresser and addressee are both situated, while the vertical axis corresponds with ‘the multiple meanings of the word [or phrase] as it has been used in other settings and exchanges’ (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77). Kristeva’s and Bakhtin’s conceptualizations of meaning also parallel those of Voloshinov. All four theorists locate meaning in both the immediate contextual present use and past uses of the text, utterance, or word.

Additionally, both Kristeva's and Bakhtin's theories fit well with Derrida's 'field of meaning' theory. For Derrida, like both Bakhtin and Kristeva, 'words always contain within themselves traces of other meanings than their assumed primary one' (Collins and Mayblin, 2011: 89). Derrida, Voloshinov, Jakobson, Kristeva, and Bakhtin all outline a point that is crucial for my purposes; namely, words and phrases carry traces of previous uses. These traces mean that a religious symbol in a comic book communicates more than the author of that symbol may realise. This is because the meaning a reader assigns to any given symbol is not isolated; it is related to that reader's previous experiences with that symbol. It then follows that how a reader interprets a symbol becomes part of a reader's intertextual history and, as such, influences future interpretive pursuits.

In the same way, because actors, artists, and writers carry traces of previous work with them, a director's casting of an actor, or an editor's employ of an artist or writer, communicates more than what may initially be realised. This is because a reader's or audience member's past exposure to work connected to various members of a creative team has the potential to influence how that reader or audience member approaches current work. The consequences of auteurism become palpable here. Take, for instance, the 2013 Superman movie *Man of Steel* directed by Zack Snyder and produced by Christopher Nolan. Both Snyder and Nolan have developed auteurist standings in popular discourse; Nolan due, in large part, to the Dark Knight Batman trilogy (*Batman Begins* [2005], *The Dark Knight* [2008], and *The Dark Knight Rises* [2012]), *Inception* (2010), *The Prestige* (2006), and *Memento* (2000) (Kaushik, 2012). Snyder's status is due, in large part, to *Man of Steel* (2013), *Sucker Punch* (2011), *Watchmen* (2009), and *300* (2006) (Perretta, 2013). A reader who approaches *Man of Steel* with an auteurist understanding of either Snyder or Nolan may allow their interpretation of the film to be influenced by previous

films like *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Rises*. A Snyder fan may attribute the costuming and grittier story and filming of *Man of Steel* (compared to previous Superman films) to Snyder's style and his previous work on the transmedia adaptation of *Watchmen*. Conversely, a Nolan aficionado may attribute the same features of *Man of Steel* to the film being a 'Nolanverse' version of Superman.

So then, it is possible that a reader's or viewer's choice to ascribe auteur status to an individual could influence how they relate to all texts attributed to that auteur: the auteur influences the textual background of the reader or viewer, which means the auteur becomes, in this instance, an integral part of that reader's or viewer's intertextual horizon, so to speak. This is of utmost importance as nearly everything in this method has pointed, in one way or another, to two simple points: 1) implicit and explicit recognition of intertextual references is integral in active meaning making, and 2) a reader's horizon—his or her socio, historical, textual, and religious background—affects his or her interpretation of a text and is affected by texts.

Theories of intertextuality, like Kristeva's, necessarily assume an active audience; when intertextual references are involved 'active participation of the audience [is needed] to make the connections between the disparate entities' (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 76). This active participation of the audience is heightened in comic books due to the formal convention of the 'gutter'—the white space in-between panels that requires a reader to literally fill in the blanks of a story. Additionally, intertextuality—which requires active audience participation—is also heightened in superhero narratives in both films and comic books.

Many superheroes have 'official' canons (material that is formally recognized as part of the character's history as opposed to material that was either explicitly written as non-canonical or material that has been retroactively declared as non-canonical). Writers of superhero

narratives often work from, and sometimes subvert, aspects of these canons. Although superhero filmmakers cannot assume all audience members will have the same canon familiarity as comic book readers, it is likely that a significant portion of superhero film audience members will have some previous textual (in the broadest sense of the word) history with characters like Superman and Batman. Hence, writers are likely to construct their narratives with an awareness that their readers will bring varying levels of intertextual familiarity to the text; essentially, writers, artists, editors, and producers of superhero narratives work with an acute awareness of how intertextuality may affect the interpretation of their work. If those involved in the creation and production of superhero narratives work with an awareness of active audiences and intertextuality, it should follow that any model designed to analyse superhero narratives and interpretation would do the same. For this reason, authorship theories, semiotics, and intertextuality—all of which deal with active audiences, meaning making, intertextual histories, and world-views—are indispensable parts of my own methodology.

Comic Books as a Potentially Effective Site of Hierophany

Earlier in this thesis and in some of my prior work on this topic I have used Lyden's work on transcendental film as a jumping off point to examine the fluid, liminal nature of mythic and religious characters and narratives in order to explore what, exactly, makes such characters and narratives sacred (Atchison, 2015[a]). I have also adopted the work of Pascal Boyer and religious studies and myth theorists like Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, and Umberto Eco to suggest that the superheroes featured in comic books sometimes fulfil similar roles as, and perform similar functions to, the gods of mythology and, potentially, modern religious traditions while outlining the way some of the medial qualities of comic books enhance this function. At the

beginning of the methodology section of this thesis I established why existing transcendental film theory cannot be easily applied to superhero narratives in either films or comic books. What I have not done is demonstrate why the medium of the comic book could serve as a hierophanous site and, therefore, warrants the application of a theory of transcendental style.

Though I have already established the fact that comic books and films cannot share the same theory of transcendental style because of distinctions between the two media, it is important to revisit two other key reasons preventing such a unified theory—namely, realism and the environment of consumption. A filmic version of events will, as Bazin noted, have a different relationship to viewers than a drawn version of the same events. Though many films incorporate digital effects, live-action movies still have an ontological relationship with reality that comic books will never match.[37] Second, the experience of watching a film in a cinematic environment is markedly different than the experience of reading a comic book. As Clive Marsh has noted, 'film-watching (or film-experiencing) is an embodied experience. There is a visceral element to it. It is affective' (Marsh, 2009: 264). The experience of watching a film in a darkened and isolated environment enhances the already affective nature of film that makes it, to quote Marsh again, 'a "whole person" experience' that requires viewers to do 'considerable emotional and aesthetic work' (Marsh, 2009: 264) while exposed to 'often stunning aural and visual stimuli' (Marsh, 2009: 264). While many viewers experience films through a television, PC, phone, or tablet, it is notable that the cinematic experience is available to filmgoers while it is not available to comic book readers.

Comic books—like all media—involve affect but they cannot boast of the same sort of all-encompassing, communal, and isolated experience that a cinematic event can entail. In a

[37] An exploration of the ontological relationship between fully animated and CGI films and reality is beyond the scope of this thesis but is a promising avenue for further research.

cinematic environment a viewer can be taken into the world the film presents, which—perhaps—requires less ancillary material to create a convincing backdrop. Even if a particular comic book is extraordinary in its world building so that it is exceptionally adept at inviting the reader to inhabit and, to borrow from Gadamer, blend their horizon with the world that particular comic book presents, it will still fall short of the type of realism needed for a Bazinian or Schrader-like transcendent style.

I suggest that, while comics come up short regarding some aspects of realism necessary for transcendent film theory, they excel in areas that easily lend themselves to expressing the transcendent. In fact, it is possible that the very factors that preclude applying existing transcendental film theories to comics may contribute to comic books serving as a surprisingly effective site of hierophany in their own right.

While films—especially when viewed in a cinematic environment—have the advantage of being incredibly immersive, comic books allow consumers to process the information they present more fully. As Wayne Wanta, Shahira Fahmy, and Mary Angela Bock point out, 'generally, people respond automatically and unconsciously to media with information processing varying across media platforms. For example, individuals are less able to process messages that appear on television than those that appear in print media' (Fahmy, Bock, and Wanta, 2014: 109). This point becomes especially important when considering the way readers comprehend comic books because of one of the medium's defining traits—what Thierry Groensteen identifies as the 'multiframe' (Groensteen, 2007).

The multiframe is, quite simply, the structure of a comic book page that links individual panels together. It is often in the form of a grid but is sometimes structured differently to draw attention to a particular page or create a specific effect. The multiframe, though simple, is unique

to the comic book form. Film director Ang Lee has tried and failed to reproduce the effect of the multiframe on film, achieving nothing more than an 'exercise in stylistic remediation [that] is an act of formal compromise between the contradictory norms of two media' (Morton, 2017: 65-66). The particular way the multiframe functions in the pages of a comic book will prove to be central to many of the medial factors that I will set apart as uniquely suited to creating a site of hierophany. The multiframe becomes especially important when it is considered in light of the co-creative role of comic book readers and the ability of comic book narratives to simultaneously take place in multiple spaces and timeframes without jarring the reader.

The co-creative role of all audiences has already been well-established. I have not, as of yet, conducted an in-depth analysis of how comic books have elements that make reading them a uniquely co-creative experience but will analyse this phenomenon below. The 'gutter'—the space between comic book panels—is one of the most important formal qualities of a comic book; without a gutter there is no multiframe. Removing the gutter from a comic book removes part of the co-creative role comic book readers enjoy. Since I have linked transcendent interpretations of narratives to the active role of audiences it would follow that the gutter enhances the transcendent possibilities of the comic book. Douglas Rushkoff's article ('Looking for God in the Gutter') is wholly dedicated to identifying the gutter as a place where comic books express the transcendent.

Rushkoff begins his article by claiming that 'comics have always been about mythic narratives and being: Superman is nothing if not Godlike, the Marvel Universe is virtually a pantheon, and even Charlie Brown was everyman's Job' (2010: ix). He then goes on to ask to single out the gutter as a specific formal quality of the comic book that enables it 'to communicate, simulate, and perhaps even actualize transcendence' (Rushkoff, 2010: xxi). For

Rushkoff, the gutter is the space that requires comic book readers to take 'a leap of faith […] every time they move from one panel to the next' (2010: x) and participate in the assembly of the comic book narrative. Though Rushkoff focuses on explicitly religious comics his general point—that the transcendent quality of comic books is linked to the participatory nature of consumption that the gutter demands—is applicable to all comics regardless of their content, is corroborated by other scholars, and fits well in my own audience-centred approach to transcendent style.

Evan Thomas, for instance, suggests that 'the gutter, in fact, contributes an entire plane of meaning to comics that employ it' (Thomas, 2010: 157) while comics practitioner and theorist Scott McCloud marks the gutter as a space where closure—the process where the reader fills in the blanks, becoming a sort of co-creator who is now especially invested in the narrative—takes place. He acknowledges that many forms of media require our minds to commit closure unwittingly but claims that comics use 'closure like no other [medium]' and is dependent on the presence of the gutter (McCloud, 1993: 65). The gutter, for McCloud, is where the reader becomes 'a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time, and motion' (1993: 65). Indeed, Liam Burke claims that 'the reader participation required to stimulate movement from one panel to the next is often celebrated as comics' defining feature' (2015: 177). The number of theorists that link the gutter to the particular way comic books transform unwitting readers into creative collaborators is remarkable.

Though few of these scholars—save for Rushkoff—connect the gutter to transcendence, the connection (in light of audience participation) seems justified. A comic book might not be able to mimic the immersive environment of a cinematic film experience or the affective response that kind of experience can produce, but by enlisting a reader as a co-creator a comic

book may be able to immerse a reader into the narrative world just as effectively. Once the reader is immersed in the narrative world the comic book projects—the world in front of text if we borrow Ricoeur's phrase—they are able to inhabit it and take it over or, if we return to Gadamer, at least allow the horizon of the text to blend with their own. Once a reader inhabits the world the text projects, the unlimited semiosis of the comic book image makes the reader's intertextual and cultural histories become very important. I am not claiming that the gutter alone allows for every comic book to become a potential site for hierophany; I am, however, suggesting that the gutter is one of many medial traits that—when combined with certain narratives—contributes to the possibility that some comic books can have a transcendent quality for some readers.

Darby Orcutt is yet another comics theorist who praises the co-creative nature of comics and connects them to religion. He claims that comics' 'readers take an active role in crafting comics narrative by acting as co-creators of their reading experience' and that 'comics narrative, by its nature, functions in an immersive fashion' (Orcutt, 2010: 97). He then goes on to suggest that the uniquely immersive nature of comic books is part of what grants them such transcendent potential due to the way 'religious narratives [also] solicit deep involvement on the part of their audiences' (Orcutt, 2010: 98). Orcutt then goes on to further connect religious narratives and comic books through their mutual reliance on icons, how both religious narratives and comic book narratives approach time, and the way religions have often employed comic-like forms of expressions. Orcutt theorizes that religions use icons to promote human identification and, by implication, suggests that comic book icons function in a similar way (Orcutt, 2010: 95). Though I am not convinced that religions rely on icons simply to encourage identification—I think

historical necessity due to a lack of literacy among congregants is an equally plausible reason—I do not doubt that the icons found in both comics and religion do encourage reader identification.

McCloud, like Orcutt, connects reader identification in comics with the way the form relies on icons. According to McCloud, comics overcome their lack of a film-like ontological relationship with reality through their sometimes-cartoony aesthetic: 'The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled […] an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm' (McCloud, 1993: 36). I should note here that Martin Barker despises scholarship based on identification, going so far as to claim that it is redundant, dangerous, reactionary, unscientific 'and has no further place in serious studies of the possible influence of the mass media' (1989: 108-112). That said, his criticisms seem to take issue with the type of identification scholarship and outlandish claims that create causational relationships between youth violence and popular media, especially video games. The types of claims Barker criticizes are what led to the 1954 publication of Frederic Wertham's infamous *Seduction of the Innocent*, the connected congressional inquiry that followed, and—ultimately—the development of the Comics Code. Barker's response to this type of identification 'scholarship' mimics my own: 'Would it not be more likely that such a film [or comic book, or video game] would move us, if we were strongly affected by it, to avoid any situation that might involve us in their kind of suffering?' (1989: 106). Though I take Barker's distaste for the use of the word 'identification' in relation to popular culture scholarship seriously, I do not think his criticism can be successfully levied against the way I (and the scholars I use) approach identification—that is, in a way that simply posits that where identification is higher so too is reader/viewer engagement. This kind of approach is one that Barker (perhaps unintentionally) supports when he acknowledges the possibility of being strongly affected and impacted by a film.

In addition to establishing that comic books use an iconic, cartoonish style to promote reader identification and immersion McCloud also draws his attention to another unique aspect of comics—the way they deal with the problem of time. He claims that 'space does for comics what time does for film' (McCloud, 1993: 7). Because of this, comics can show a reader the past, present, and future all at once (McCloud, 1993: 104). Comics achieve this through the use of the multiframe: one double page-spread of a comic book could feature different characters in different historical and physical settings while still remaining connected through the comic's overarching narrative. Drew Morton writes about this extensively and identifies the treatment of time through the multiframe as one of the main aspects of a comic book that films cannot successfully remediate.

Morton uses Thierry Groensteen to demonstrate how,

> regardless of the closed nature of the comic panel, readers are often faced with a series of complex compositions that threaten the narrative flow of the page. As theorist Thierry Groensteen observes: 'A page of comics is offered at first to a synthetic global vision, but that cannot be satisfactory. It demands to be traversed, crossed, glanced at, and analytically deciphered. This moment-to-moment reading does not take a lesser account of the totality of the panoptic field that constitutes the page (or double page), since the focal vision never ceases to be enriched by the peripheral vision.' (Morton, 2017: 30)

Though these complex compositions threaten the narrative flow of the comic narrative, the comic book narrative often survives as a cohesive whole.

Another advantage of comic book viewing practices linked to a comic book's treatment of time is related to the reader's freedom to easily flip back and forth between pages while reading at their own pace. This reading practice allows readers to digest multi-layered narratives and complex multiframes at their own pace while also encouraging the inclusion and recognition of a variety of intratextual and intertextual references. Films do, of course, house intertextual and intratextual references, but the cinematic experience of a film does not allow for the same type of

slow, methodical reader engagement naturally afforded by comics. That said, it is important to note that people watch films in places other than the cinema. Ian Hague acknowledges that 'other types of presentation, such as split screen, and alternative forms of viewing technology, such as DVD, could help to bridge the gap between the two media' while maintaining that these viewing practices 'are not wholly effective in expressing the same meaning' (Hague, 2012: 45). In short: non-cinematic viewing of films may allow viewers to pause, take screenshots, rewind, and fast-forward, but the practice is laborious, time-consuming, and disrupts the general flow of the narrative. Films just do not allow viewers to transcend time as easily as comic books. The advent of alternative ways of viewing comics (such as through an app on a phone, PC, or tablet) brings the experience of reading a comic book closer to that of watching a film through the same devices. That said, digital comic book viewing practices still allow the reader to control the pace of the narrative and do not disrupt the reader's ability to linger on a specific page or panel or to flip between pages with ease. The fact that similar film-viewing practices (such as pausing, rewinding, fast-forwarding, and taking screenshots) are laborious and hinder the narrative flow of the film speaks to the differences that make comic reading and film viewing practices distinctive despite their increasing similarities.

If we return to Orcutt the importance of the non-linearity of comics becomes evident. For him, comics are able to express religious narratives exceptionally well because 'traditional religious expression works against a modern, linear, and historicized view of time' (Orcutt, 2010: 98). The way comic books allow readers to traverse a narrative and jump across time not only lets the reader experience a narrative that transcends time, it makes the comic book especially suited to such narratives. Moreover, it lets the reader control time in a god-like omniscient way. When the reader inhabits the world that the comic book projects to them, they

may inhabit it as a character within the story who is having a transcendent experience, or they may choose to inhabit it as a transcendent creator who controls time and place.

Medial factors that separate comic books from film—their lack of 'realism', reliance on icons, cartoonish aesthetic, treatment of time, and visual multiframe structure—and preclude us from applying existing transcendent film theories may actually enable comic books to be an effective site of hierophany. That said, just as certain types of films are more likely to express the transcendent than others, so too are some types of comic book narratives. As such, I will dedicate the remainder of this section to outlining why superhero narratives may enhance the transcendent possibilities of both films and comic books.

The Transcendent Potential of the Superhero Narrative

I suggest that superhero narratives are uniquely suited to expressing the transcendent because of both character and functional parallels with various myths and mythic figures. The parallels between superheroes and mythological characters are well recognized. Characters like Superman lend themselves to a variety of religious interpretations that can include comparisons to Jesus and Moses, while other characters like Thor bear their namesake from ancient lore. Recall Greg Garrett's bold claim that 'our American superheroes are equal parts demigods from Greek myth, strongmen and prophets from the Judeo-Christian tradition, literary lions and characters from folktales and pop culture traditions' (Garrett, 2008: 9-10). Though the surface level parallels between comic book characters and religious figures are striking, the religious functions of superheroes in general are more interesting. Recall that in my literature review I conducted a brief overview of Christopher Knowles's 'Cult of the Superhero' claim. Knowles's work suggests that superheroes have a religious significance that goes beyond the mere surface

level parallels they share with divine and mythological figures; he claims that they sometimes functionally operate as gods for their fans (Knowles, 2007: 3) and supports this claim by referencing fan behaviour that mimics the activity of religious adherents (Knowles, 2007).

Joseph Laycock does not reference Knowles's work but continues in a similar vein, albeit with far more knowledge of and engagement with the scholarly community. Laycock uses a variety of religious studies theorists to demonstrate the mythological function of He-Man without comparing the character to actual mythological figures. Though I will not be writing about He-Man in this thesis, Laycock's observations are applicable to most superhero characters and universes. First, he claims that the external quality of He-Man 'conforms to Mircea Eliade's theory of myth as stories that occur outside of normal time and space *in illo tempore* [in that time][38] (Eliade 1968, 70)' (Laycock, 2010: 9). This observation could be applied to a wide gamut of superheroes without changing a single word. Moreover, the way comic books express time makes them ideally suited to include stories that occur *in illo tempore*, that is stories that occur during an undetermined time.

Laycock then moves on to address the mythic functions of key settings in the He-Man universe identifying 'Castle Grayskull [as] a place "set apart and forbidden"—Emile Durkheim's definition of the sacred (Durkheim 1995, 44)' (Laycock, 2010: 10).[39] Durkheim's description of

[38] Eliade typically uses this term to refer to time outside recorded history.

[39] In Durkheim's 1912 *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* he attempts to undertake the task of defining religion. After rejecting definitions that rely on specific deities, rites, and beliefs that make something inherently religious (Durkheim, 2012: 1-37) he ultimately concludes the following: 'A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them' (2012: 47). For Durkheim, the specific details of the sacred are not as important as an object, person, or place's sacred status and the community that forms around the beliefs that imbue said status. This is because the 'division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought' (Durkheim, 2012: 37). With regard to superhero sacred spaces, it is clear that they are set apart from the rest of the world. Only members of the superhero community can go to the Batcave or to Superman's fortress of Solitude. The spaces are otherwise closed to 'ordinary' people and things. Furthermore, entering said places often leads to the transformation of the entrant (Dick Grayson becomes Robin when he discovers the Batcave, for instance).

the sacred can be applied to a variety of superhero narrative settings including Superman's Fortress of Solitude, Batman's Batcave, and Thor's home world of Asgard as well as a variety of objects found in superhero worlds.

After addressing the religious functions of He-Man's characters and settings, Laycock goes on to address how 'Children's performance of He-Man [and other types of Superhero play] parallels Eliade's model of ritual as a repetition of a primal action that occurred *in illo tempore* (Eliade 1996, 32)' (Laycock, 2010: 18).[40] This observation aligns Laycock with the work of both Knowles and Lyden. All three theorists observe audience reactions to popular culture narratives and link those reactions to what has been, at certain points in history, a reaction to religious narratives.

Umberto Eco—one of the first superhero theorists—also connected the basic features of the comic book character to the basic make up of many religious figures. According to Eco, traditional religious figures could either be human or divine as long as they had immutable characteristics and an irreversible destiny (1972: 147). For Eco, 'the mythic character [including Superman] embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and cannot hold surprises for us' (1972: 148). Though Eco wrote specifically about Superman, his observations are applicable to most longstanding superheroes; Batman's parents will always die and he will always fight crime as a result of his trauma. The specifics of each story may change but, ultimately, he will remain Batman. The Hulk will always have an accident that transforms

[40] Interestingly, Laycock does not connect the children's social activity to the second core trait that Durkheim claims is essential to any lived religion: its community aspect. For Durkheim, 'a society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world, and by the fact that they translate these common ideas into common practices, is what is called a Church. In all history, we do not find a single religion without a Church' (Durkheim, 2012: 43-44). While Durkheim's claim that a religion must have a community can certainly be contested, it does align with the way Laycock treats the children's He-Man play as religious practice and, as such, the absence of engagement with Durkheim on this matter is notable. A promising avenue for future research may include analysing superhero film fan practices as they relate to Durkheim's conceptions of church, sacrality, and religion.

him into a monster that he struggles to control and use for good. Wonder Woman will always leave her world to enter ours and attempt to bring peace. Every mainstream superhero embodies their own personal code and cannot escape their destiny.

Lastly, superhero narratives are especially suited to communicate the transcendent because superheroes—like mythic characters—not only transcend time and change, they transcend binaries separating the secular from the profane. I have previously argued that superheroes maintain part of their mythic quality by balancing what Pascal Boyer has identified as the intuitive and the counterintuitive—they, not unlike ghosts, are unique enough to be utterly different from our perception of ourselves, thus being worthy of our attention, curiosity, fear, and/or admiration, while also being similar enough that we can identify with them as human beings (Atchison, 2013). In short, a figure—like a superhero—who balances the intuitive and the counterintuitive transcends our perception of humanity while meeting with it, which allows such figures to be relatable while retaining a supernatural quality.

Recall that Deacy connects the redemptive effectiveness of filmic Christ-figures to how well these figures portray their authentic humanity (Deacy, 2001). He argues that 'the *noir* "redeemer" [. . .] has the potential to enable the *film audience*, in a manner akin to the influence of the person of Christ upon the *Christian community*' (Deacy, 2001: 76) but that this potential can only be realised if the redeemer is an 'authentically human character who undergoes a redemptive experience with [their] finite human condition' (Deacy, 2001: 89). Deacy does not mean that a figure cannot have a divine dimension: in fact, he praises Scorsese's 1988 portrayal of Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ* as an excellent example of a redemptive figure whose low Christological representation enhances their redemptive potential. For Deacy, Scorsese's Jesus is human enough to be 'one of us' and 'since he constitutes "one of us", *we* are able to

share in the redemption that Christ has accomplished' (Deacy, 2001: 89). Just as Boyer calls for a balance between the counter-intuitive (the supernatural) and the intuitive (the natural) for mythological figures, so too does Deacy for redemptive figures.

While many superhero narratives do not achieve this balance in how they portray their protagonists, some do—a trend that Deacy notices and praises (Deacy, 2001: 149). The remainder of this thesis will consist of case studies that investigate how four different representations of superhero narratives (three filmic and one comic book) achieve their transcendent potential. I will be using the frameworks outlined by Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy to evaluate each case study while utilizing the work of adaptation theorists, intertextuality theorists, semioticians, theorists who specialize in authorship and auteur theories and hermeneuticists to provide further context. Each case study will end with an overview of selected fan and critical responses to the narratives in order to evaluate whether there is evidence of the film or comic book's transcendent potential being realised.

Chapter 3: *Captain America: The First Avenger* Case Study

In this chapter I will be conducting a case study of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011).[41] This case study will demonstrate that existing transcendent film theories can be applied to *The First Avenger* with some substantial caveats. I have chosen *Captain America: The First Avenger* as my first case study because it fits into the Marvel Avengers series of films in an integral way and is demonstrative of an approach to film production—the Marvel blockbuster style—that has dominated many superhero films over the last decade.

Before I begin to explore the ways *Captain America: The First Avenger* does or does not fit into existing transcendental styles of films I will outline—in very broad strokes—some of the religious parallels found throughout the film. Captain America, unlike characters like Superman or Thor, does not have a literal god-like quality and—as a result—has not been identified as a salvific and religious symbol by many religious (especially Christian) writers. That said, his origin story (as found in the film) closely parallels that of Jesus Christ.[42] Both Jesus and Captain America (also known as Steve Rogers) are born into humble circumstances (Jesus is born to a carpenter (Joseph) and a young woman (Mary) in a small town and Rogers is born to a soldier and a nurse in Brooklyn). Both Jesus and Rogers are transformed into a heightened version of themselves by supernatural means (Jesus does not begin his ministry as Christ until the Holy

---

[41] Throughout this chapter I will be alternating between using the full title of the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* and shortened titles (*The First Avenger* and *Captain America*) to avoid repetition and increase clarity where needed.

[42] Please note that religious parallels found in superhero films are not limited to Christianity. I simply focus on Christian parallels in this chapter due to the current predominantly Christian make-up of the West as well as the cultural Christian backdrop that, in many ways, defines the World War II setting of *Captain America: The First Avenger*. In the remainder of this thesis my primary focus remains directed toward Christian religious symbols and parallels in superhero narratives due to the aforementioned role of Christianity in modern Western society as well as my own religious and cultural background and biases. That said, I do also dedicate space to recognizing and investigating the presence of non-Christian symbols and parallels.

Spirit descends on Him as John the Baptist baptizes Him [English Standard Version Bible, Luke 4:14-30] and Rogers does not begin his heroic journey as Captain America until he is transformed by a super serum). With the exception of Jesus's miraculous birth (Matthew 1:18-25, English Standard Version) as well as his early wisdom as a child (Luke 2:41-52, English Standard Version) the recorded (and canonical) early life of both Jesus and Steve Rogers are fairly unremarkable before their transformation. Steve Rogers is depicted as a scrawny and physically weak young man while Jesus, early in his Christly ministry, is rejected by the people of his hometown who simply dismiss him as a lowly carpenter from an unremarkable (at least externally) family (Mark 6:3, English Standard Version). Both Christ and Captain America sacrifice themselves for the sake of others (Christ on the cross and Captain America at the end of the film when he deliberately flies an aircraft full of bombs capable of killing millions into the Arctic) and both Christ and Captain America are resurrected at a later date to continue their salvific mission (though in markedly different ways). Lastly, both Captain America and Christ seem to espouse similar moral philosophies and value systems: they both delight in honesty, courage, selflessness, humility, and protecting the weak from the abuses of the strong. Even though *Captain America: The First Avenger* is not an overtly religious film it still has religious parallels and—I argue—the potential to be a transcendent film for some viewers.

In my methodology section I placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of intertextuality as it relates to meaning-making processes among active audiences. I argued that a reader or viewer's cultural and intertextual background will influence whether or not the transcendent potential of any given narrative will be realised by the reader or viewer. Specific formal, narrative, or character elements can favourably and detrimentally affect the transcendent potential of any given narrative, but these factors function alongside the cultural, historical, and

intertextual backgrounds of each individual reader and viewer. This case study, along with the ones that follow it in subsequent chapters, will analyse the way character, narrative, and formal elements influence the transcendent potential of each narrative before evaluating fan and critical responses, while also engaging with the impact of intertextuality.

Though I have and will continue to argue that *The First Avenger* has the potential to be a transcendent film, I admit that it is not—at first glance—a movie that fits into decades of existing transcendental film research. In my methodology section I conducted an overview of Roy M Anker's *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Anker, 2004) in conversation with Christopher Deacy's contribution to Routledge's reader on film and religion (Deacy, 2007) to comment on how film blurs the line that is typically (and often arbitrarily) drawn to separate the sacred from the profane (Deacy, 2007: 307). Both Deacy and Anker argue that film and religion have a longstanding relationship that has often included film expressing and interacting with religion in a variety of ways. I then cited the abundance of scholarship available (some of which was examined in the literature review section of this thesis) that concentrates on the relationship between religion and superhero narratives in film and other media. After acknowledging the long and notable history that religion shares with both film and superhero narratives, I moved on to use film and religion theorists to draw attention to the challenges of communicating the transcendent—that is, more than simply religious symbols and parallels—in film.

Anker's solution to communicating the transcendent, in his words 'making the invisible, visible', is to focus on the ordinary to point to the extraordinary (Anker, 2004: 13). In my method section I argued that Anker's solution does not typically work for superhero narratives due to the way such narratives, especially ones that do not focus on the origin and pre-super-heroic life of the main protagonists, rely on an extraordinary character or group of characters.

This holds true for the subject of this case study (*Captain America: The First Avenger*) as well as the subjects of the three other case studies that I conduct in the remainder of this thesis.

The superhuman (and sometimes god-like) powers of some of the characters that populate the Marvel Cinematic Universe that Captain America is a part of do not point to the extraordinary, they are the extraordinary. These films do not proclaim the hiddenness of transcendence that Anker and more well-known theorists like Paul Schrader and André Bazin see as the cornerstone of a successfully transcendent film and yet, as I elucidated in both my literature review and methodology sections, the characters that populate these films sometimes become functional equivalents to mythological and religious figures.

Recall that, for Bazin, the key to a truly transcendent film is in the way it communicates grace and spirituality through realism and by focusing on the way faith functions in the day-to-day lives of characters with saint-like traits. Bazin praises films like *Diary of a Country Priest* (Bresson, 1951) and *Heaven Over the Marshes* (Augusto Genina, 1949) for the way they use their characters, stories, and events to 'assert […] the total transcendence of grace, which occurs at the expense of apologetics [and] Christian propaganda' (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 7). He also praises the way these films ensure that every religious parallel 'carries its own biographical and individual meaning […]. [It is not] an imitation of its divine model, rather it is a repetition and a picturing forth of that life' (Bazin, 2007: 59). In the method section of this thesis I suggested that, for Bazin, recording the supernatural on film would not only be impossible but would also violate the very nature of film itself. I also argued that the ontological relationship between film and reality that Bazin praises may not be tenable today.

For Bazin, the beauty of film stems from its relationship with the natural world, which is defined by the very process of recording without human interference, making the photographic

image ‘a part of the world rather than its mimesis’ (Hilsabeck, 2016: 32). This is what sets film apart from other artforms that require direct human involvement for the work to be produced: anyone may set a camera down and leave it and would still end up with a filmic representation of whatever fills the frame. This representation would likely be markedly different than what would be produced by a person actively filming the same scene, but it would exist. By contrast, someone leaving a paintbrush on or near a canvas would not produce a painting. It was this distinction that defined film’s relationship with humanity for Bazin; it was a medium that could record reality without the direct and prolonged involvement of a human hand.

In the method section I argued that filmic images are so manipulated in modern films (even those that do not rely on CGI) that the medium’s relationship with reality has fundamentally changed since the time of Bazin’s writing; it is no longer taken for granted by the audience that a film can truly record reality. I claimed that this ontological change is bolstered by the increased knowledge that audience members have when it comes to filming, editing, and digital manipulation techniques. I then explained how these changes in film production and audience awareness make it difficult to apply any theory, like Bazin’s, that was developed based on historically located film production methods that are not applicable to modern movies. As a result of this, I explained that I would be limiting my use of Bazin’s theory to the aspects of the theory that evaluate how ‘the total transcendence of grace’ occurs ‘through the very nature of [a film’s] characters, story, and events’ (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 7). Before applying the narrative elements of Bazin’s theory to *Captain America: The First Avenger* I will briefly reiterate Paul Schrader’s more contemporary transcendent theory of film, which will also be used to evaluate *The First Avenger* throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Paul Schrader's transcendent film theory is similar to Bazin's in that it privileges realism and relies on specific formal conventions to maximize the transcendent potential of the film. Schrader, like Bazin, also draws a distinction between imitating a divine model and functioning as 'a repetition and a picturing forth of that life' (Bazin, 2007: 59) or, to repeat Schrader's words, 'the proper function of transcendental art is [. . .] to express the Holy itself [the Transcendent], and not to express or illustrate holy feelings' (Schrader, 1972: 7). Although Schrader does not grant film the same ontological connection to reality that Bazin does, he does rely on 'precise temporal means—camera angles, dialogue, editing' to invite audience members to encounter the transcendent (Schrader, 1972: 3). Recall that many of the film techniques that Schrader sees as useful for his transcendental style are slow cinema techniques, which generally makes them difficult to use in superhero narratives like *Captain America: The First Avenger*. In short, superhero films do not tend to fit Schrader's framework. That said, the 'mechanics' of Schrader's transcendental style that the formal means are used to accomplish can be applied to superhero narratives.

Recall that, for Schrader, a film that communicates the transcendent must successfully achieve the mechanics of transcendental style. In other words, the film must create a sense of a dull, everyday existence, interrupt the aforementioned banality with some sort of disparity that creates 'an actual or potential disunity between man and his environment' (Schrader, 1972: 42), ensure that the aforementioned disparity culminates in a decisive action, and ultimately conclude in a state of stasis—'a frozen view of life which does not resolve the disparity but transcends it' (Schrader, 1972: 49). In my method section I argued that although Schrader does not position his mechanics as narrative elements they do serve a narrative function as they must occur in a specific order to be effective. It then follows that the mechanics can be applied to the narrative of

Captain America: The First Avenger (as well as other superhero films) to investigate whether or not each mechanic can be achieved without the use of slow-cinema techniques that the formal elements of Schrader's transcendental style rely on. Given this, for the remainder of this thesis I will be treating Schrader's transcendental mechanics as narrative stages.

The first of these stages calls for a film to establish a sense of dull, everyday normalcy. *Captain America: The First Avenger* accomplishes this through repetition. It begins with Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) repeatedly attempting (and failing) to enlist in the army and follows him as he yells at a man twice his size for being disrespectful during a movie and, as a result, ends up in a mismatched fight that leads to his friend intervening on his behalf. *The First Avenger* takes pains to establish that Rogers often ends up in unwinnable physical conflicts that he refuses to run from. The movie also repeatedly shows the audience that Rogers' close friend James Buchanan 'Bucky' Barnes is everything Rogers wants to be and is always there to bail Steve out of fights while unintentionally upstaging him. For Rogers, this is a part of his dull, everyday, normal life.

The second stage calls for the aforementioned state of dull normalcy to be cut short with something that clearly indicates disparity (Schrader, 1972: 42). For Schrader, this disparity is often communicated to the viewer by 'delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane' so that the viewer is confronted with, and must resolve, a sense of unease (Schrader, 2018: 3). While *Captain America: The First Avenger* does not use such techniques, the ominous presence of WWII in the backdrop could, presumably, create a sense of unease and an urge for resolution among the characters in the film and the audience members. The cultural and intertextual histories of many who reside in the West would include knowledge of the war and may include a personal connection to the evils

associated with it. Given the claims of Gadamer and Ricoeur, it is safe to assume that viewers with a knowledge of or a connection to WWII would have their interpretations of *The First Avenger* impacted by that knowledge or connection, which could foster the disunity that this stage in Schrader's style calls for.

The next stage calls for a decisive action in response to the previously established disunity. In *The First Avenger* this stage occurs twice. First, when Steve Rogers agrees to participate in a military experiment that will make him into a super soldier. The experiment is successful, but the assassination of the head scientist leads the military to protect their new (and only) super soldier by using him in daily war-bond propaganda shows. The film—through repetition and Evans' performance—takes pains to demonstrate that these daily shows become monotonous for Rogers (which may mark a return to Schrader's first stage). Rogers' new routine is only interrupted when he is faced with a crisis—his friend Bucky is presumed to be dead or captured by the enemy—that 'culminates in a decisive action' (Schrader, 1972: 42); namely, Rogers disobeys his commanding officer and dons his Captain America gear in order to rescue Bucky and the rest of the unit's captured soldiers. This heroic action thrusts Rogers into the centre of major military operations and is what transforms him into the Captain America whom comic book fans know and love.

Recall that Schrader's third stage focuses on the end of the narrative and requires a sort of stasis to be achieved that does not resolve the earlier catalyst but transcends it (Schrader, 1972: 49). For Schrader, stasis often involves a static image as well as withholding a resolution from the viewer (Schrader, 2018). This kind of static, withholding image is meant to encourage 'an acceptance of [a] parallel reality—transcendence' (Schrader, 2018: 3). Speaking about Andrei

Tarkovsky's 1983 film *Nostalghia*, Schrader outlines how the penultimate scene had the potential to achieve stasis if it had been the last scene of the film:

> At the end of the film, Dominic, a deranged mystic, immolates himself. In response, Andrei, the film's protagonist and Tarkovsky's surrogate, fulfils a promise to Dominic to carry a lit candle across the waters of a mineral pool. The pool is empty, but Andrei struggles against wind and failing health to complete his task—back and forth, back and forth. Andrei places the flickering candle on a stone ledge and dies off camera. This is stasis, the end point of transcendental style. It's a Bressonian ending. [. . .] But Tarkovsky doesn't end *Nostalghia* there. It concludes with a black-and-white image of Andrei resting beside his dog outside his ancestral home before a reflecting pool, poetic images from Tarkovsky's repertoire. The camera pulls back to reveal that Andrei and dog and house are all on a grassy field inside a ruined cathedral. Snow falls, folk music plays. The intent is not to namelessly escort the viewer. This is the artist's self-apotheosis. This is not about the Wholly Other. (Schrader, 2018: 24-26)

Schrader's refusal to grant *Nostalghia* transcendent status based on the extra scene at the end of the film is telling. Despite the film using the slow cinema techniques that Schrader praises and including a static scene that communicates the stasis that Schrader calls for, the film ultimately fails Schrader's stylistic evaluation because it continued after the static shot. *The First Avenger*, like *Nostalghia*, includes a static shot that embodies stasis near the end of the film before ultimately adding to it in order to provide a full resolution. In short, it falls into the same trap.

The end of *The First Avenger* includes a scene where Captain America crashes into a frigid environment while the war is still ongoing and is later found in a frozen state. At first, this scene seems to successfully communicate transcendence. Though the film's antagonist, Red Skull, was defeated by Captain America on the plane, this culmination of his efforts did not solve the war—the very disparity that served as the catalyst for Rogers' call to action—or allow him to escape unscathed. He is stuck, frozen in time. Ultimately, though, the film does not end there. The very last scenes of *Captain America: The First Avenger* feature Steve Rogers alive and well in the twenty-first century being debriefed so that he can assume the mantle of Captain

America once again. So then, even if the formal elements of Schrader's transcendental style are ignored—and even if the mechanics of that style are adapted and treated as narrative stages—*Captain America: The First Avenger* is not a perfect fit. That said, it comes surprisingly close to successfully achieving all of Schrader's mechanics of transcendental style without relying on any of the formal elements that Schrader treats as indispensable.

Earlier in this chapter (as well as the methodology section) I made it clear that Bazin's theory cannot be easily applied to any modern film, especially one based on a superhero narrative. That said, just as aspects of Schrader's theory can be applied to the narrative elements of *The First Avenger* it is possible to apply aspects of Bazin's theory to the character elements of *The First Avenger.* I claim that the character-driven narrative of *The First Avenger* parallels what Bazin admired about *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Heaven Over the Marshes*, both of which maintain strong, relatable characters who have saint-like attributes, without falling into the pitfalls of overt displays of religiosity for the sake of religiosity. I will also argue that Steve Rogers can serve as a Christ figure who balances both high and low Christological conceptions of Christ in line with what Deacy praises about the *film noir* protagonists that he analyses in his journal article (Deacy, 1999) and accompanying seminal monograph (Deacy, 2001).

Captain America: The First Avenger is primarily character driven, focusing on Steve Rogers' journey more than his super-heroic antics. Rogers' admirable moral traits are established early on in the film: he is brave, kind, polite, assiduous, self-sacrificial, principled, and humble with a healthy, though not overpowering, sense of American patriotism. These character traits are tested and developed throughout the film and become a central part of the narrative—Rogers is chosen to become Captain America because of these traits. The audience is taken on a journey with Rogers as he goes from a gaunt man filled with grit and determination to a super soldier

selling war bonds while donning a kitschy costume, to a leader who uses his strength to save others and sacrifices what he believes will be his life in the process. Essentially, we are shown that Rogers is willing to take on any role he needs to if it will help the greater good while still managing to maintain the core characteristics that convinced Dr. Erskine (Stanley Tucci) to pick him to be Captain America in the first place.

Though Captain America's life and journey are presumably dissimilar from most movie-goers' experiences, the traits that are central to his characterization are commonly seen as good qualities that are promoted by religious and public institutions; these qualities may serve as an anchor to which viewers can relate. It can be difficult to make a superhero relatable. A character like Superman is difficult to identify with because he has had superpowers his entire life and does not experience daily mortal vulnerability. Batman can be similarly unrelatable due to his unmatched wealth and privilege and unique trauma. Captain America (as portrayed in the Marvel Cinematic Universe) appears to be a notable exception. This may be because of how much time is devoted to fleshing out who Steve Rogers is before he receives any superpowers—just a regular person trying to do the right thing despite his limitations.

The amount of time the film dedicates to fleshing out the authentic humanity of Steve Rogers enhances the impact of him as a character and as a potential redemptive figure on and off screen. Recall that Deacy argues that the redemptive potential of Scorsese's *film noir* protagonists is inextricably linked to their authentic human nature. They are not portrayed as nearly divine in their moral or physical strengths. Instead, 'Scorsese's protagonists characteristically wrestle with feelings of sin, guilt, fear and, even though it may not always be possible so to do [sic], undergo an experience of redemption and thereby aim to lead a moral life in what amounts to a defective and fallen world' (Deacy, 2001: 106). Although Rogers is not a

typical *film noir* protagonist, he does struggle with human weakness. Prior to Rogers' transformation into Captain America the filmmakers show him wrestling with feelings of envy (for Bucky who can serve in the war, defend himself and Rogers from bullies, and effortlessly interact with women), failure (of not being good enough to enlist in the army and repeatedly being declared unfit for service), powerlessness, guilt, and frustration. After he becomes Captain America he is able to fight for his country, defend himself and others from bullies, and potentially get the girl of his dreams. That said, Rogers as Captain America does not escape all the negative feelings that drove him to become Captain America in the first place. He still experiences feelings of failure, guilt, powerlessness, and frustration (much of which is caused by Bucky's capture and later death)—despite his moral and physical strengths he is still authentically human.

Many of the reviews of *Captain America: The First Avenger* praise the character-driven narrative as a feature of the movie that distinguishes it from other, more poorly received superhero films. Take, for instance, Josh Tyler's *CinemaBlend* review of the film. Tyler begins by praising the 'good' and 'noble' characteristics that define Steve Rogers. He then goes on to frame these characteristics in striking opposition to the 'dark and brooding superheroes' that, for Tyler, were the hallmark of the modern superhero film era until *The First Avenger* (Tyler, no date: para. 7). He also claims that 'Captain America isn't just the first Avenger, he's the first Marvel character to get a complete, fully functional movie […] This is stem to stern, an honest to god film' (Tyler, no date: para. 1).

One of the aspects of *The First Avenger* that Tyler identifies as a possible reason for its success is how character driven the film is. He claims that the film may work so well because 'it

doesn't feel as though it set out to be a superhero movie' (Tyler, no date: para. 2). For Tyler, the film's willingness to focus on things other than super-heroics is its main strength:

> *Captain America* is less interested in its character's super powers than what it took for him to get them and how he'll use them. When it comes to Cap's abilities, the movie barely discusses them. […] Instead the movie starts by showing us who Steve Rogers is, and then once it transforms him, focuses entirely on showing us the man he's become. (No date: para. 2)

Tyler's review demonstrates how impactful the character of Steve Rogers was for him. This is notable given that *Captain America: The First Avenger* is full of many other elements that could have been its defining feature. There are multiple action scenes, a love story, interesting sets and costumes, and intertextual references that hint at the foundation of what is going to become *The Avengers* series of films. In isolation, Tyler's review does not bear much weight. When, however, it is combined with other reviews that praise the same aspects of *Captain America: The First Avenger* it becomes part of a collective response that suggests that *The First Avenger* may have the narrative and character development necessary to be a Bazinian transcendent film and to have the redemptive potential that Deacy typically reserves for *films noirs*.

Roger Ebert was also pleasantly surprised by *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Ebert's review begins by purposefully expressing his negative bias toward superhero films. In fact, most of the positive things Ebert has to say about *The First Avenger* are framed in contrast to films like *Green Lantern* (Campbell, 2011) and *Thor* (Branagh, 2011). This tendency is shared with Tyler, who also framed *Captain America: The First Avenger* in opposition to other superhero films. Though Ebert still takes issue with superhero film staples like exorbitant CGI (which he colourfully describes as 'preposterous' and 'wildly absurd') he seems to make an allowance for its presence in *The First Avenger* due to how the special effects are 'set up and delivered with more control [than the likes of *Thor* or *Green Lantern*]' (Ebert, 2011: para. 8).

Ebert reserves his highest praise (and surprise) for the general quality of the film despite its reliance on CGI:

> It was a pleasure to realize, once *Captain America: The First Avenger* got under way, that hey, here is a real movie, not a noisy assembly of incomprehensible special effects. Of course, it's loaded with CGI […]. But it has the texture and takes the care to be a full-blown film. You know, like with a hero we care about and who has some dimension. And with weight to the story. […] I enjoyed the movie. (Ebert, 2011: para. 1)

Both Ebert and Tyler treat *Captain America: The First Avenger* as something exceptional. For them, it is not like other superhero films: it is much better precisely because of the way it balances the typical superhero staples with a well-tuned narrative and a well-developed titular character.

Ebert and Tyler's praise for *The First Avenger* is shared by *The Mary Sue*'s Rachel Leishman. Her review praises similar aspects of the film but it has a key difference: Leishman has the benefit of time and comparison on her side since she wrote her article after seeing how Marvel has used Captain America in subsequent movies. Despite the presence of better rated films, Leishman still prefers *Captain America: The First Avenger* to them all and even she has difficulty pinpointing why this film stands out to her:

> It's hard to explain what's so special about that first movie. Maybe it's just because of the simplicity of it: fight the bad guys, try to make it home in one piece. There weren't wars between Avengers. […] It was just 'fight the war, try to stop the Nazis, come home'. Granted, only the first two were accomplished, but still, this movie had heart, courage, and brought us our beautiful boys from Brooklyn. (Leishman, 2018: paras. 1-2)

Near the end of the review Leishman acknowledges that her impression of the film may not be the most common one:

> It may not be everyone's favourite, and that's okay, but *Captain America: The First Avenger* will always hold a special place in my heart because it was just about Steve

> Rogers trying to do what he thought was best for the world. (Leishman, 2018: para. 7)

Leishman's unique, personal tone suggests a more intimate experience with the film than the detached praise or criticism that can often characterise a film review, while still echoing the same praise as more formal reviews. She loves *Captain America: The First Avenger* because of its tight narrative and Steve Rogers. For Leishman, Ebert, and Tyler, the movie's characters, finely tuned narrative simplicity, and lack of frills are what allows it to shine.

Recall that, for Bazin, a proper transcendent film should not have overt religious spectacle unless the narrative clearly requires it and should not endeavour to be an imitation of some sort of divine model but, instead, should serve as a 'repetition and picturing forth of that life' (Bazin, 2007: 59). I acknowledge that the reviews I have cited thus far do not actually mention religion, God, or any sort of spirituality and do not suggest that the writers have had a transcendent experience as a result of the film. As a result, I have not yet demonstrated that the life of Steve Rogers in *Captain America: The First Avenger* is such a repetition of a divine model. The remainder of this chapter will illustrate that the film has the potential to serve as a repetition of a divine model for some viewers.

The fact that the reviews I have summarized have not referenced any specific religious parallels is not entirely surprising given that Captain America is not typically associated with mythic and godlike powers or resemblances and so religious associations may not come naturally to audience members who are not primed to make them. In my method section I emphasized the importance of intertextuality as it relates to transcendence. To summarize: what an audience member recognizes and the way their world blends with the world presented by a text (to borrow Hans-Georg Gadamer's phraseology again (Green, 2005)) is heavily informed by their intertextual background. If we hark back to John Fiske's helpful description of how viewers

interpret television shows (quoted on pages 70-71 of this thesis) we can recapture the picture of how the intertextual background of a viewer will determine what they notice and appreciate in a film:

> All the other words [on a page or images on a screen] escape your attention as your eye scans the fast-moving information, but your name is deeply imprinted on you: you are primed to recognize its familiar form even when you are unaware that you have been 'reading' the information. (Fiske and Hartley, 2003: 4)

Though Fiske is not writing specifically about intertextuality, the mental picture he paints is an apt illustration of it: when our minds are flooded with images and sounds, we recognize and respond to those that we are primed to see—to those that are familiar to us. Given this, it is likely that reviewers writing out of a particular religious background for a particular religious audience will produce reviews that contain more religious content. So then, now I will turn my attention to reviews written by reviewers writing out of a Christian context to, presumably, a largely Christian audience.

Movieguide: The Family Guide to Movies and Entertainment is a Christian website dedicated to providing media reviews and recommendations to Christian families. As such, their writers and readers are typically from a Christian background and their reviews are published with a distinct religious, often pedagogical, purpose. Though *Movieguide* does recognize and celebrate the 'very strong Christian, moral, patriotic world view' of *Captain America* as well as the way the film 'stresses faith, sacrifice, courage, heroism, and doing the right thing while fighting National Socialist, totalitarian evil and tyranny' (Movieguide, no date: para. 13) the article does not identify these parts of the film as its most laudable features. Instead, the reviewer focuses almost entirely on the plot and characters of *The First Avenger*. They praise the way 'the filmmakers focus on story and character. They take the time to develop their characters. This tactic pays off big time later when the action goes into hyper drive. It also gives their ending a lot

of heart' (Movieguide no date: para. 11). Given the stated purpose of *Movieguide*'s existence along with the presumably Christian background of most of their contributors and readers, it is surprising that the reviewer did not spend more time talking about the spiritual parallels that are present in *Captain America*: *The First Avenger*. The lack of space dedicated to specific religious symbols and parallels may simply be because Captain America is not typically associated with religion, but I suggest it is more likely the fact that pointing out religious allusions is not a very effective pedagogical tool when the writer's aim is to provide Christian guidance and teaching on and through popular films. This is something that Bazin clearly understood: religious parallels without a clear narrative presence are not effective, but saintly characters who live out the Gospel in a relatable way are compelling. Steve Rogers seems to be one of those characters for the writers at *Movieguide*.

Reel Spirituality, the film and television arm of Brehm Center (an art-focused online Christian community), features a review by Elijah Davidson that similarly lavishes *Captain America: The First Avenger* with praise. Davidson commends the film's integrity, brisk pace, engaging visuals and the way the tone balances 'seriousness about the situation and silliness about the superpowers' (Davidson, 2011: para. 6). The film's tone gets special attention throughout the review as an aspect that makes films like *The First Avenger* distinct from their grittier counterparts: 'The films don't take themselves too seriously, even while the characters in the stories are serious about their situations. […] The peril is real even when the powers are ridiculous' (Davidson, 2011: para. 6). This observation is what could allow superhero films to communicate transcendence while still being full of supernatural elements. If the film and viewer are in on the same joke (i.e., superpowers are ridiculous) then the superpowers may simply become part of the backdrop of the film until they no longer hamper viewer immersion—an

element of transcendent films that is incredibly important. Recall Clive Marsh's argument that watching a film is an embodied 'whole person' experience that is affective, visceral, and requires the viewer to do 'considerable emotional and aesthetic work' (Marsh, 2009: 264). When a film is marred by elements that hinder the immersion central to Marsh's ideal film-viewing experience, the affect of the film is reduced, which may also diminish a film's transcendent potential.

In some ways, this is part of what Bazin was concerned about when he lamented the use of overt religious spectacle and symbolism, going so far as to claim that the overuse of such affinities makes such films religiously insignificant (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 1). Many superhero movies take a very different route to the one recommended by Bazin and, as a result, they hamper viewer immersion, which ultimately diminishes the impact of the film on would-be fans. A full evaluation of how these weaknesses can affect viewer immersion and, as a result, the transcendent potential of a film will be conducted in the next case study on *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016).

Arguably, *Captain America: The First Avenger* avoids each of the above pitfalls. The film does not overuse religious symbols and physical representations of the supernatural. There are supernatural elements but they are not excessive, and serve a real purpose in developing a strong character and narrative. That said, the supernatural elements of the movie could still be distracting if a viewer were to be asked to actually believe that they are possible; by maintaining a humorous levity about the supernatural elements of the film, *Captain America: The First Avenger* allows its character and narrative elements the opportunity to shine. The impact of the film's tendency to not 'take [itself] too seriously' is reflected in the *Reel Spirituality* review where Davidson praises the film's balanced tone, which successfully communicates both the seriousness of Rogers' situation as well as the silliness of superpowers (Davidson, 2011: para. 6).

Logan Judy, a writer for *Cross Culture*—another film review site geared toward Christians—also focuses on the character of Steve Rogers (and Chris Evans' memorable portrayal of him) as the main strength of *The First Avenger*. Like the writers at *Movieguide*, Judy uses Steve Rogers' character as a pedagogical tool but does so with more explicit theological references. He begins by praising Evans' portrayal of Rogers:

> You're led to root for this scrawny kid because he's everything that we should be. Brave. Virtuous. Noble. Qualities, in fact that every Christian should strive to have. […] So know as you go into this film, that it's not Marvel's best work in terms of cinematic quality. There are cringe-worthy moments in this story, most of them directly involving Rogers. But there's also a story of integrity here that you almost never see in mainstream media period, and that alone makes it something worth seeing. (Judy, 2014: para. 6)

What is interesting about Judy's review when compared to the others analysed in this chapter is that it is not entirely positive. Most of the reviews I have sampled in this chapter have been generally impressed with *Captain America: The First Avenger*; they have admitted that the film has flaws but treat those flaws as minor misgivings. Judy sees the film as average at best and laments its 'cringe-worthy' moments while still praising the character development of Steve Rogers and his relatability (he claims that Evans' portrayal of Rogers is 'as real as it gets' [Judy, 2014: para. 6]) as the redeeming factor of the film. Judy's mention of *The First Avenger*'s 'cringe-worthy' moments is especially notable. Such moments can easily encapsulate the types of religious filmic expressions that Bazin warns against—portrayals of the transcendent that are overt and unrelatable and ultimately hinder a film's transcendent promise. Despite these moments, Judy appears to have been affected by the character of Steve Rogers strongly enough to have a sincere theological reflection. This raises the possibility that narrative and character elements may be enough to carry a film like *Captain America: The First Avenger* through overt and unrelatable expressions of the supernatural.

Pluggedin published a review by Paul Asay that is also geared toward a Christian audience, takes an overtly religious approach to the film, and aims to highlight anything that may be pedagogically useful for Christian parents while pointing out potentially objectionable content. Unlike all of the other Christian reviews that I have concentrated on so far, Asay approaches *Captain America: The First Avenger* with a negative lens. He takes issue with occult references throughout the film as well as Captain America's tendency to use lethal force without much thought or apparent consequence. Though he does take the time to point out that 'the idea of drawing strength from weakness offers us a faint echo of Christianity' (Asay, no date (a): para. 14) he does not dwell on this point as a redeeming feature of the film and does not pay attention to any other specific religious parallels. That said, his review does include some accolades for *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Asay—like all of the other reviewers I have engaged with so far—heaps praise on the characterization of Captain America/Steve Rogers, claiming he is 'as pure and honest and obvious a hero as you'll find in theatres these days' (Asay, no date (a): para. 11). What is unique about Asay's review is how he uses the character traits of Captain America/Steve Rogers to connect him with a nostalgic image of the United States as '[…] a beacon, a city on the hill' (Asay, no date (a): para. 31). This language is telling and calls to mind (likely deliberately) both Ronald Reagan's famous 'Shining City Upon a Hill' frequent descriptor of the United States and Matthew 5:14. In most translations, Matthew 5:14 paints the ideal Christian and Christian community as a light and a city on a hill.[43] The combination of religious and patriotic language to describe and engage with Captain America is not unique to Asay or *Pluggedin*, but it is striking.

[43] 'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden' (Matthew 5:14, NIV); 'You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden' (Matthew 5:14, NLV); 'You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden' (Matthew 5:14, ESV); These are just a few examples of how this verse is rendered nearly identically across translations.

An in-depth review of the connection between patriotism and religion in regions of the United States is beyond the scope of this chapter and thesis. That said, I would like to briefly note and comment on the fact that there are other reviews and articles that knit Captain America, patriotism, and religion together. Tyler Huckabee, for instance, in his article 'American Hustle: A Purer Patriotism From the *Captain America* Trilogy' considers how his American, politically located religious upbringing is connected to his own Captain America fandom: 'I can attribute some of my fandom to growing up deep in a red state, where the American flag carried an almost religious connotation; there was one hanging in the pulpit of our church, right between the baptismal and the cross' (Huckabee, 2019: para. 5). He then goes on to reflect on the general narrative arc of Captain America's filmic representations and their connection to myth and patriotism:

> And a fairy tale it is: the story of a young nobody plucked by fate to be his nation's champion when it needed one most, embodying its highest ideals. It's the same story many of us were given about America, and like any myth, it has a lot of power if you believe it. (Huckabee, 2019: para. 10)

This patriotic treatment of Captain America is notable because it suggests a link between religion and American patriotism. Although fully investigating this link is beyond the scope of this thesis, its possible presence may grant Captain America subtle religious connotations that could influence the interpretation of the narratives that feature him for some audience members.

Fervr, another Christian media review site, similarly praises the plot and pacing of *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The review, written by Joel A. Moroney, hails the film as 'one of the most consistently good superhero movies ever made' because, in large part, 'it manages to be a tight, heart-felt adventure' (Moroney, 2011: para. 2). Unlike the other Christian reviews I have analysed, Moroney explicitly connects the character of Steve Rogers/Captain America to Biblical figures. He begins by claiming that 'at the core of Captain America is the

story of a young man who was chosen for greatness. He wasn't chosen because he was the biggest or the strongest or the most handsome. He was chosen because of what was in his heart' (Moroney, 2011: para. 6) and goes on to pair this description with Bible verses in order to compare Captain America to King David and Jesus. Moroney effectively casts Steve Rogers' character development and transformation into Captain America as a Judeo-Christian allegory. Moroney does not claim that the parallels between Captain America and King David or Jesus are there on purpose (the character may or may not have been developed with these figures in mind); for him, the presence and resonance of the parallels are what is important. So then, even the reviews that do make explicit religious parallels, connections, and comparisons between *The First Avenger* and Christianity do so in a way that privileges the saintly character of Steve Rogers.

The remarkable consistency of praise with respect to the plot and characters in *Captain America: The First Avenger* across religious and secular reviews calls to mind Bazin's requirement that a truly transcendent film goes beyond simply imitating a divine model in order to actually picture forth that model (Bazin, 2007: 59). The lack of an abundance of overt religious imagery in *The First Avenger* suggests that it is not simply an imitation of a religious narrative or character type; this is because an imitation of any sort of model typically includes specific references and/or call-backs to the original, which *The First Avenger* lacks. The tendency for the narrative of *The First Avenger* and the character of Steve Rogers to resonate with Christian reviewers to the point where many of them use Rogers as a pedagogical tool in a Christian character study is notable: it suggests that he has religious and/or spiritual significance to the writers despite his lack of overt Christian religious symbolism. These reviewers do not use Rogers as a pale imitation of Biblical characters, rather they treat him as a fictional and useful

embodiment of Biblical characteristics, suggesting that for these writers Rogers is a 'picturing forth' (Bazin, 2007: 59) of a Christian model despite the backdrop of CGI and supernatural elements in which his story unfolds. Although Rogers' saintly characteristics align him with the characters that Bazin has praised, it is important to note that these characteristics do not overtake his weaknesses. Rogers may be saintly, but he is still clearly portrayed as a human being who struggles through guilt, failure, pain, and loss. These struggles allow him to maintain his relatability, as well as a human-centred redemptive quality in line with what Deacy praises about Scorsese's *film noir* protagonists.

So then, it is clear that *Captain America: The First Avenger* fits some of the narrative aspects of Schrader's transcendental style as well as the character elements of both Bazin's and Deacy's frameworks for a film that can successfully communicate and potentially stimulate redemption among viewers. Though Captain America lacks the religious and spiritual lineage of some of his superhero counterparts, the religious and spiritual symbolic potential of the character comes to life when filmic representations of him are viewed through a transcendent film theory lens. The depth of this religious and spiritual symbolic potential can also be demonstrated through a brief snapshot of social media posts and fan works centred around the character.

Tweets connected to heroes like Batman and Superman demonstrated an abundance of religious language, even when religion was not being discussed (this will be explored more deeply in the next chapter). This was intriguing, but not entirely surprising given how much literature explores the connection between superheroes and religion. By contrast, in tweets about Captain America, this religious language is largely absent. We can, though, identify comparisons between Captain America and religious figures (Figures 1 and 2), tweets that use Captain America as a way to communicate the folly of religion or the lack of authority of religious texts

(Figure 3), debates about Captain America's faith (Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c), and tweets that liken Captain America to politicians while also using religious language (Figure 5).

The presence of tweets that compare superheroes like Captain America to religious figures (Figure 1) are not surprising. The self-sacrificial narratives that feature these heroes often mimic religious parables that privilege self-sacrificial qualities. If a person's intertextual background has primed them to search for and find these similarities, they will be successful. The presence of tweets that debate the religious faiths of superheroes (Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c) are similarly unsurprising. What is particularly intriguing is how some Twitter users related the very nature of a story to God (Figure 2) and, even more fascinatingly, the way some tweets used the idea of stories to communicate their disdain for religion (Figure 3).

Figure 1 (above); Figure 2 (below)

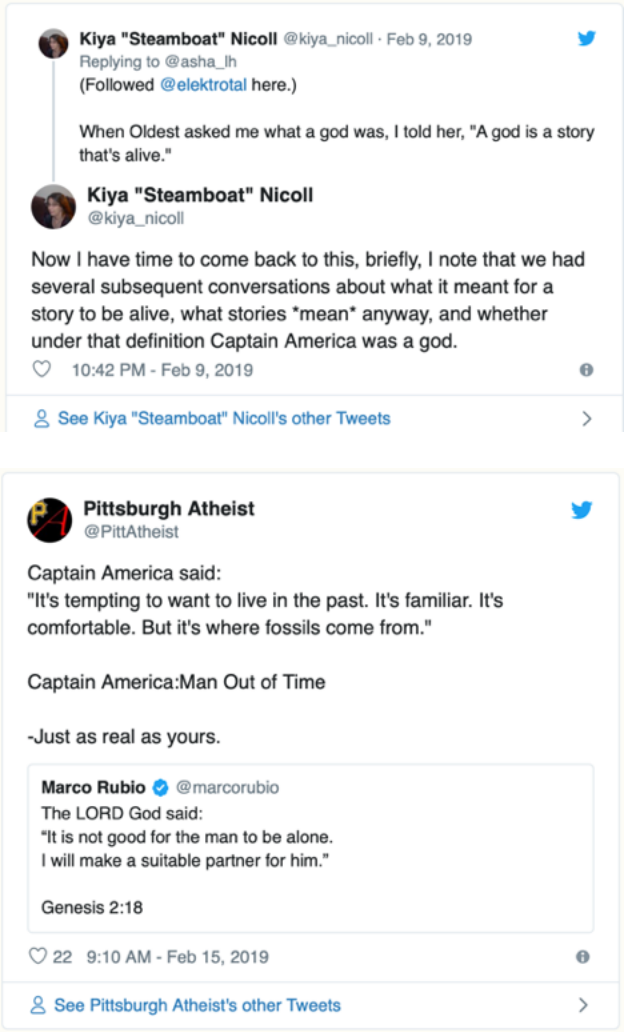


Figure 3 (above)

Figure 4a (above) Figure 4b (below)

Figure 4c (above)

Figure 5 (above).

On the one hand, connecting stories to religion is not entirely surprising; many religious scriptures find their origin in oral storytelling. Using the concept of a story to reflect on the reliability and usefulness of faith and religion is similarly unsurprising since the concept of truth (as it relates to both factual accuracy and communicating more philosophical truths) is debated in both religious and literary circles. On the other hand, conflating religion and storytelling while explicitly using superhero stories points to the confluence of religious/mythic and comic book inspired narratives.

Though all of the above tweets connect Captain America with religion in different ways and to various extents, they all demonstrate that some see a close relationship between the character and Christianity.[44] The nature of Twitter suggests that these tweets were likely sent quickly, perhaps without much thought. On the one hand, this demonstrates how the connection between Captain America and religion and spirituality may be habitual and quite natural for some people to make. On the other hand, such a short—and perhaps hasty—tweet does not necessarily demonstrate that Captain America has religious or spiritual significance to the Twitter users who post about him.

It would be hard to find a clearer expression of a text's significance on a person than the presence of fan fiction. The popularity of Captain America has, unsurprisingly, led to the presence of a vibrant fan fiction community. The volume of fan works that take Captain America and religion as their subject is striking. A keyword search of 'Captain America' and 'religion' produced 930 individual results on *Archive of Our Own*[45] while keyword searches that combined 'Captain America' with 'faith', 'god', 'transcendence', 'spiritual,' or 'saviour' brought forward a

[44] See Appendix A for further examples of tweets that connected Captain America to religion, faith, or spirituality.
[45] *Archive of Our Own* is a fan-run and created, not-for-profit archive of various types of fanworks that boasts over 2.5 million members and six million fanworks.

further 717 results.[46] This combined total of 1647 works that connect Captain America to religion or spirituality of some sort is notable, even though it only accounts for under five percent of all the works on *Archive of Our Own* at the time of writing.

Two fan fiction pieces from *Archive of Our Own* are particularly striking. The first is entitled 'Faith' and was contributed by community member Owlmoose. The second is entitled 'Winter Discoveries' and was contributed by community member WinterMagnets. Both 'Faith' and 'Winter Discoveries' are set in a Catholic church and focus on Rogers' struggles with faith and identity. 'Faith' casts Rogers as a lapsed parishioner who is grappling with guilt for the lives he has taken while bearing the mantle of Captain America and 'Winter Discoveries' casts Steve Rogers as a priest for the parish he grew up in and features Bucky as the second main character.

In 'Winter Discoveries', WinterMagnets explores Rogers' faith, his love for Bucky, and his reaction to Bucky admitting that he is secretly in love with an unidentified man during confession:

> [The] realization hits Steve square in the chest and his heart breaks a little for his long time friend. James is in love with a man and his own beliefs are at war with his feelings. The situation must be tearing him to pieces. He can see James cover his face with his hands and can hear him murmuring to himself. Steve then does something that he was warned not to do, he addresses James directly, 'Bucky, it's ok.' (WinterMagnets, 2014: no page).

Bucky's admission incites Rogers to grapple with his faith and its doctrines while considering his feelings for Bucky:

> Listening to James, Steve suddenly feels crowded in the small confessional, hot and unable to breathe. It is like the spoken words have created a world before him and the world is beautiful. He is surprised that he can see the life James would create for that man and even more than that, he is surprised that he feels angry that James can never have that. [. . .] When James leaves Steve stays in the confessional trying to come to grips with this thing he has just learned about his oldest friend. The nature of the confession asks of him to forget what he's learned and not to allow it to affect his

[46] Both of these searches were conducted on 28 March 2018.

> behaviour towards the man outside the confessional, but how can he forget? (WinterMagnets, 2014: no page).

In ‘Faith’ Owlmoose uses Rogers’ confession to explore themes of inner peace, responsibility, regret, guilt, forgiveness, and penance. The piece begins with Rogers confessing that he has killed ‘too many people to count’, some himself and ‘many others [who] died indirectly by [his] actions, or [his] inactions’ (Owlmoose, 2014: no page). The priest responds by reminding Rogers of ‘the special dispensation given to soldiers, [sic] when following legitimate orders to serve a just cause’ (Owlmoose, 2014: no page). Rogers then goes on to reveal that he has recently learned that the orders he was following were not serving a ‘just cause’. Owlmoose uses this revelation to engage in a theological reflection on where the burden of guilt ought to reside when a soldier is ‘just following orders’. Ultimately, the priest concludes that Rogers does bear some responsibility for following unjust orders because Rogers admits that he ‘didn’t look too deeply for the truth’ and that he ‘didn’t know because [he] didn’t want to know’ (Owlmoose, 2014: no page). That said, the priest also reminds Rogers that ‘we aren't meant to carry the weight of all our sins, for all our lives. No one can bear that kind of burden, no matter how broad their shoulders are’ (Owlmoose, 2014: no page).

Both Owlmoose and WinterMagnets imbue their works with religious imagery, signalling their familiarity with Catholicism and Western Christianity. Though neither author explicitly labels themself as a Christian in their work (Owlmoose identifies as an agnostic from a Protestant background in the introduction to ‘Faith’), both of the fan fiction pieces use personal language to portray Steve Rogers struggling with his faith. Regardless of the religious beliefs of the authors—they may have a personal history with the Christian church or they may not—each work demonstrates thorough and deep reflection of what it might feel like to be Steve Rogers and experience doubt, guilt, shame,

pride, and tension because of his faith. This kind of reflection suggests that each author was truly affected by the character of Steve Rogers and engaged in theological reflection because of it.

At this point, I should note that neither of these fan fiction works are explicitly drawn from *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Instead, they are based on the character and the collective comic book narratives that define him; and this is where the difficulty lies when talking about the transcendent potential of a superhero film. The histories of established superhero characters are carried with them, which makes it difficult to evaluate a comic book superhero film as a standalone text. Each viewer will approach *Captain America: The First Avenger* from a different intertextual location. Some people may have encountered him for the first time through the film, some may have been aware of the character prior to the film without necessarily engaging with any other texts that feature him, while others may have, to varying degrees, engaged with comic or cartoon texts based on the character.

Even if a superhero film is based on a specific comic book run or standalone story it cannot escape the decades-long history of the characters it features. Recall that Barthes argued that a text (in the broadest sense of the word) 'requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading [or, in this case, viewing], not by intensifying the reader's projection into the work, but by linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice' (Barthes, 2007: 85). When we consider the extensive history of well-known comic book heroes across media, along with both Barthes' theory of the Text and Gadamer's interpretive framework—which argues that when a person encounters a text their worldview blends with the worldview presented by the text—the incredible polysemic potential of a comic book superhero film becomes palpable. Though this polysemic potential can lend a superhero

film transcendent potential, it makes that transcendent potential difficult to pinpoint and entirely reliant on the viewer's history with both spirituality and past iterations of the superhero in question.

Captain America, like all superheroes with a long history, has an incredible polysemic potential that likely impacted the way the reviewers I analysed approached *Captain America: The First Avenger* and, I argue, impacted the Christian reviewers to such an extent that Captain America, for them, became a picturing forth of a Biblical ideal of good character. The way *The First Avenger* fits the transcendent frameworks espoused by Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy heightened this transcendent potential but its existence, as demonstrated in my method, is just as reliant on the polysemic nature of Captain America/Steve Rogers as it is on the form of the medium that tells his stories.

Since *Captain America: The First Avenger* is not based on a standalone text, an examination of how the comic book medium influences the transcendent potential of the narrative and the way Rogers is portrayed in it is fraught with difficulties related to seriality that are beyond the scope of this thesis. Because of this, I will not be analysing comic book narratives that feature the character. That said, the final two case studies of this dissertation are based, respectively, on the filmic and comic book portrayals of *Watchmen* and provide an opportunity to investigate the impact of the comic book form on the transcendent potential of a superhero narrative. In the next chapter, however, I will direct my attention to a film with far more overt religious dialogue and symbolism than *Captain America: The First Avenger* to investigate the impact of overt religiosity on the transcendent potential of the superhero narrative.

Chapter 4: *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* Case Study

The *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011) case study demonstrated that a superhero film can fit within a modified transcendental framework. Though *The First Avenger* does not satisfy the formal aspects of André Bazin's, Paul Schrader's, and Christopher Deacy's criteria for transcendental style it does fulfil many of the narrative and character elements of those styles. In both my method section and the *Captain America: The First Avenger* case study I argued that Bazin's formal criteria is difficult to apply to modern films because of the decreased phenomenological distance between film/photography and (in this case, digital) painting. Bazin's criteria was heavily dependent on avoiding lighting or editing tricks, but in an age of green screens and CGI it is possible that a remake of *Diary of a Country Priest* (Bresson, 1951) could be made using those technologies and still fail Bazin's requirements for transcendental film.

Recall that, for Bazin, the beauty of film and photography is 'a result of a process that does not involve the human hand and that it is, in this sense, a part of the world rather than its mimesis' (Hilsabeck, 2016: 32). For Bazin, the difference between a filmic or photographic recording of reality and painting (however realistic it may be) is as rooted in the medium's origin as its aesthetic quality. A painting of a photograph that is virtually indistinguishable from the original cannot share the photo's unique beauty because of its phenomenological relationship to reality as something manufactured. For this reason, any film that uses easily identifiable special effects will fail Bazin's formal framework for transcendental style. This problem is amplified by the audience's knowledge of how filmmakers modify all films, even those who purport to record reality exactly as it is. With all this in mind, I contend that any transcendental style based on the formal quality of film as a medium capable of recording a genuine reality cannot be applied to

the vast majority of modern films. This leaves us with the narrative restrictions that have been applied to transcendent styles of films.

Although Schrader's style is not as rooted in the formal realism of film as Bazin's, it does privilege filmic representations that avoid excessive use of special effects and that use slow cinema techniques to encourage contemplation among filmgoers (Schrader, 2018; Schrader, 2017; and Schrader, 1972). Throughout this thesis I have argued that while Schrader's framework is applicable to modern films its stylistic requirements are quite narrow and do not account for the reactions that some audience members have had to Bollywood epics (Nayar, 2010). Recall that Nayar outlined instances where viewers reacted to Bollywood epics based on religious narratives by performing puja—a ceremonial act of worship (Nayar, 2010: 101). The reactions that Nayar cites indicate that films outside of Schrader's specifications are capable of invoking responses that suggest that viewers have contemplated (or even encountered) the transcendent. I also argued that some of Schrader's framework operates in a narrative fashion and applied those elements to *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that—despite featuring CGI and focusing on a superpowered hero and villain—*The First Avenger* fulfils most of the narrative elements of Schrader's model. I also demonstrated that the character of Steve Rogers successfully embodies the saintly traits that Bazin praised about the protagonists in both Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* and Genina's *Heaven Over the Marshes* (1949) (Bazin, 2007 and Cardullo and Bazin, 2016) before moving on to illustrate how Steve Rogers maintains an authentically human identity (complete with struggles and weaknesses) that Deacy identifies as an essential quality of effective on-screen redemptive figures (Deacy, 2001 and Deacy, 1999).

The transcendent potential of *Captain America: The First Avenger* is notable because Steve Rogers/Captain America is a superhero whose connection to religion is less overt and less recognized than some of his counterparts. Superman, for instance, is often connected to religious figures; Moses, Jesus, Samson, and various sun-gods have been touted as possible inspiration for the character (Knowles, 2007). Using Bazin I have argued that the relative lack of overtly religious dialogue, symbols, and themes in *The First Avenger* may have enhanced the film's transcendent potential as opposed to diminishing it. With all that said, the rest of this chapter is going to explore whether *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder, 2016)—a film that features characters with rich religious intertextual histories and is full of explicit religious (especially Christian) imagery, plot-points, and dialogue—can fit into the same narrative and character-centred transcendent frameworks that were able to contain *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

Batman v Superman is rich with religious, particularly Christian, imagery. As such, the film serves as intertextually fertile soil for religious interpretations that may lay the groundwork for its transcendent potential. While writers like A. David Lewis, Andrew Tripp, and Christopher Knowles have all analysed the multiple religious readings that can be applied to Superman, less has been written about Batman in this respect. That said, in this chapter I will demonstrate that Batman can also be interpreted through a religious lens.

The strength of the association between Batman, Superman, and religion or, more broadly, faith is reflected in the way fans and the general public approach these characters. In earlier chapters I drew on the work of theorists like Karline McClain, Pascal Boyer, Greg Garrett, and Christopher Knowles to establish the mythical and religious histories, parallels, and functions of major superhero characters like Batman and Superman. Though most people are

unlikely to admit to treating superheroes like religious figures, the language that is sometimes used when speaking about these characters points toward a connection between superheroes and religion. Figure 6 is an example of how individuals conflate superheroes and religious figures, even when periodically using superheroes to discredit religion (a plethora of other examples of this kind of usage can be found in Appendix B) while Figure 7 is an example of how individuals seem to connect superhero stories with their own moral development and view of faith (more examples of this kind of usage can be found in Appendix C). While Figures 6 and 7 demonstrate different types of connections, both examples point toward the shared semantic field (and history) that religion and superheroes occupy.

Figure 6 (above). Figure 7 (below).

Image with this tweet removed for copyright reasons

Given the religious underpinnings and intertextual history of its characters, it is no surprise that *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* is redolent with religious symbols, plot points, dialogue, and images. The film, like many Batman movies, begins with the death of Thomas (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) and Martha Wayne (Lauren Cohen) in front of their son, the young Bruce Wayne (Brandon Spink). The viewer is brought to their funeral and watches while young Bruce falls through a well into a bat cave where he is caught up in a vortex of bats that lifts him toward the light of day. Snyder then fast-forwards to the end of *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013) where he shows the climactic battle between Zod (Michael Shannon) and Superman (Henry Cavill) from a bystander's perspective that calls to mind 9/11 imagery.

Batman v Superman's plot begins quickly and moves briskly—a stark contrast to the slow pace of the films that Bazin and Schrader praise in their respective transcendental styles. While Zod and Superman fight the viewer is introduced to adult Bruce Wayne (Ben Affleck) looking on helplessly as a building filled with his employees is destroyed alongside countless others. Though the film brings an affective quality to each of these early plot points (there is a

particularly emotional scene where Bruce saves a little girl's life and tries to reunite her with her mother before realizing that the mother was one of his now very likely deceased employees) there is little time for the viewer to contemplate what the film is showing them. As much as the first part of the film is engaging, it does not fit Schrader's model as neatly as both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Man of Steel* do. Where *The First Avenger* and *Man of Steel* begin by showing a mundane world, *Batman v Superman* begins at a climax. There is no sense of everyday normalcy communicated; there is only chaos.

The chaotic nature of the plot becomes more pronounced as the film continues to unfold and the viewer is taken from crisis to crisis. *Batman v Superman*'s chaotic pace and climactic nature precludes the film from fulfilling the rest of Schrader's narrative stages. If there is no dull normalcy, there is nothing for a moment of disparity to disrupt. If the film is saturated with climatic battle after climatic battle, there is not a discernible, decisive action for the characters to take. If the first three stages of Schrader's framework do not exist, the fourth stage—stasis—becomes meaningless. This is because, for Schrader, stasis is a tool that encourages the viewer to confront the unease created by an ending that withholds full resolution so that the viewer may come, along with the protagonist, to 'an acceptance of parallel reality—transcendence' (Schrader, 2018: 3).

The quick, action filled pace of *Batman v Superman* appears to be an attempt to develop Bruce/Batman's and Clark Kent/Superman's character and style of heroism in order to put the two men at odds with each other. The scenes where Superman acts impulsively to protect his own interests (like rescuing his girlfriend Lois Lane [Amy Adams]) regardless of his actions' consequences are an effective way of communicating that he is a fallible and sometimes short-sighted man. The scenes where Batman fights crime with excessive violence appear to serve two

main functions: first, they put him at odds with the boy-scout nature of Superman. Second, they call to mind Frank Miller's 1986 *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*—a four-issue mini-series turned graphic novel that features an iconic battle between Batman and Superman and is 'hailed as a comics masterpiece', 'an undisputed classic', and 'one of the most influential stories ever told in comics' (DC Comics, no date: para. 1).

Throughout all of this character-developing chaos Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg) is pulling the strings, pitting the two heroes against each other in what he sees as a win-win situation: either Batman kills Superman (getting rid of a god-like threat to Luthor's perception of himself and humanity in general) or Superman kills Batman (prompting the world to turn against Superman and allow Luthor to develop a Kryptonite weapon to destroy him). While Luthor is subtly (in the loosest usage of the word) controlling the destiny of Batman and Superman, he continuously mutters dialogue borrowed from the likes of Nietzsche and Copernicus about the dangers of gods amongst men, while butler Alfred (Jeremy Irons) serves as the calm voice of reason trying to prevent Batman from playing the role Luthor has written for him.

The dialogue and imagery in this first act of the film have very obvious religious (especially Christian) overtones. Snyder has Luthor ramble about how God is dead while having newscasters and citizens discuss whether Superman is a god or a man. At one point, after a montage of Superman's heroics in the form of network news clips, the film features newscasters debating Superman's role as well as a bystander who suggests that 'maybe he's not some sort of devil or Jesus character; maybe he's just a guy trying to do the right thing'. Luthor, unlike the bystander, is certain that Superman is not 'just a guy trying to do the right thing'. Curiously, for all of his talk about God being dead, Luthor seems to treat Superman as a god. When he is talking to Lois, explaining why he is forcing Superman and Batman to fight, he describes his

main goal (to prove that Superman is not all powerful or is not all good) by speaking about God: 'I figured out way back; if God is all powerful he cannot be all good and if he is all good he cannot be all powerful'. Interestingly, Luthor's dialogue appears to be a shortened version of Epicurus' question about God: 'Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?' (Hume and Gaskin, 2008: 100). Alfred is not immune to religious dialogue either. In an attempt to dissuade Batman from taking on Superman, the butler sums up what he sees as Bruce's unhealthy obsession with Superman: 'Men fall from the sky; the gods hurl thunderbolts. Innocents die. That's how it starts, sir; the fever, the rage, the feeling of powerlessness that turns good men cruel'.

The first half of the film is not only marked by religious dialogue, there is ample religious imagery as well. There are multiple scenes where both Batman and Superman are positioned in a Christlike posture hovering in the air; the most notable one with Batman occurs at the beginning of the film when young Bruce is lifted out of the well by a vortex of bats (see Figure 8). There are also many instances where Superman's position and the reactions of those around him call to mind religious stories and characters. One particularly clear example is the scene where Superman is surrounded by a group of people reaching out to touch him while celebrating the Day of the Dead (see Figure 9). There are two especially striking aspects of this particular scene: first, it occurs during a religious celebration. Second, the awe-like expression of the crowd and their apparent desperation to touch Superman evoke a famous Biblical story:

> And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, 'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed'. Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her

> body that she was freed from her suffering'. (Mark 5:25-29, New International Version)

The fact that this scene happens during the *Día de Meurtos* celebration—a Mexican cultural tradition where relatives honour their deceased loved ones through prayer and gifts—demonstrates the polysemic nature of the image and enhances the potential for a religious reading of the moment. An observer may be reminded of the *Día de Meurtos* celebration, the Biblical story above, both, or something entirely different. The polysemic nature of the moment is particularly interesting because at least two possible interpretations are slightly at odds with one another (some Christians feel that the *Día de Meurtos* celebration is an unbiblical compromise to make an allowance for an otherwise pagan cultural ritual (Gibson, 2017)) but are able to co-exist in the image.

The religious imagery continues while (and after) Batman and Superman have their titular battle. Batman fashions a spear out of kryptonite to use during the battle that weakens Superman significantly. In his weak state Superman lays in a Christlike pose over a pile of wood that brings to mind Christ's death on the cross. The imagery linking Superman to the crucified Christ is even more overt during and after the heroes have defeated Doomsday (motion capture by Ryan Watson).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 8 (above). Figure 9 (below).

Image removed for copyright resons

After Superman and Batman join forces (Batman is stopped from killing Superman when he realizes that Superman is trying to save his mother, who shares the same name as Bruce's mother) they face a new foe—Doomsday—made by Luthor using Kryptonian technology to fuse his own blood and Zod's (Superman's now-deceased foe from *Man of Steel*) body. The religious

connotations of Doomsday's name are obvious, but Snyder ensures that it cannot be missed by having Luthor call the monster 'a devil created to bring down a god' (Superman).

Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot) join forces to stop Doomsday, but it is ultimately Superman who deals the death blow using the kryptonite spear Batman had fashioned earlier. The imagery attached to that final blow is significant. As Superman penetrates Doomsday with the spear that nearly killed him earlier (being weakened as he does so), he prevails. But in that prevailing, Doomsday pierces Superman's chest with a spear-like claw that kills Superman in his already weakened state. The entirety of this scene could reflect—for those viewers with a Christian intertextual background—the crucifixion in two ways. First, in imagery; just as Superman's chest is pierced with a spear-like claw, so too was Christ's chest pierced with a spear. Second, in theology; just as the weapons fashioned to bring about Christ's death killed Christ (the cross killed Christ while the spear penetrated his broken body and confirmed his death as told in John 19:17-34), so too did they defeat the devil and save the world in Christian theology: 'Jesus' Christ's death was itself an exaltation and victory—the Son of Man lifted up to draw the sinful world to him, and victory over the forces of Satan and sin and hell' (Sandlin, 2018: para. 19). Or, to use the words of Dr. John Piper (a well-known Protestant Christian preacher, author, and former professor):

> When Christ died for our sins, Satan was disarmed and defeated. The one eternally destructive weapon that he had was stripped from his hand, namely his accusation before God that we are guilty and should perish with him. When Christ died that accusation was nullified. All those who entrust themselves to Christ will never perish. Satan cannot separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:37-39) (Piper, 2007: para. 9).

The religious imagery in *Batman v Superman* was picked up by bloggers, reviewers, and the general public within Western, Anglophone publications (which is not surprising given how overt the imagery and symbolism is and given the way religion, especially Christianity, has

influenced the intertextual and cultural history of many people who have lived in the West for an extended period of time).[47] Take, for instance, *ScreenPrism's* Spencer Mullen who states the following:

> *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* feature overt religious imagery comparing the figure of Superman to Jesus Christ. The similarities are clear: both figures are all-powerful aliens who sacrifice themselves for the good of the human race. Director Zack Snyder sometimes forces heavy-handed allusions to Christianity into both movies, but the imagery nonetheless draws out fundamental questions about goodness and the role of a messiah. (Mullen, 2016: para. 1)

Mullen goes on to point out specific scenes in the film that, for him, allude to Christ, before moving on to make more general comparisons between the character of Superman and Christianity's Jesus. His observations about Superman's death are particularly interesting: 'When Superman's body is being taken away from the wreckage, three crosses burning in the background provide an unmistakable religious symbolism. Here, Zack Snyder references Jesus' crucifixion, which according to the Bible [Luke 23:33] took place alongside the crucifixion of two criminals' (Mullen, 2016: para. 4). After taking the time to outline the religious symbolism present in *Man of Steel,* Mullen returns to *Batman v Superman* and its cast of characters, paying special attention to Luthor, who he feels did not seem to have any clear motive for his actions apart from a hatred for God.

Mullen acknowledges that other critics (a selection of whom I analyse later in this chapter) have criticized Snyder's 'religious subtext [as] forced and shamelessly manipulative' (Mullen, 2016: para. 8) and have suggested that the religious references accomplish little within the film's narrative. That said, Mullen does not seem to share this view, claiming instead that *Batman v Superman* offers a 'mainstream exploration of Superman as one of our culture's most enduring messianic figures—an exploration that is highly critical of our need for such a messiah

[47] A more detailed exploration of Christianity's impact on the West is provided in the introduction chapter.

at all' (2016: para. 9). If Mullen's analysis of the film holds true, it is possible that *Batman v Superman* is able to offer some viewers an opportunity for reflection on the divine. In short, Mullen's defence of the film can serve as a defence for its transcendent potential despite its many weaknesses. If, however, *Batman v Superman*'s detractors are to be believed, the film's religious symbols, subtexts, dialogue, and imagery are nothing more than meaningless heavy-handed preaching that, in turn, seems to go against what both Bazin and Schrader require of transcendent films. The remainder of this chapter will explore what these polarized responses mean in light of transcendental film style.

Recall that Bazin argued that in *Diary of a Country Priest* 'probably for the first time, the cinema gives us a film in which the only genuine incidents, the only perceptible movements are those of the life of the spirit. Not only that, it also offers us a new dramatic form, that is specifically religious—or better still, specifically theological; a phenomenology of salvation and grace' (Bazin, 2007: 59). It was not the religious imagery, dialogue, or parallels of *Diary of a Country Priest* that impressed Bazin, it was the way the film was shot and the authenticity of the characters and plot-points within the narrative. Realism and authenticity were privileged to the point where anything frivolous and unnecessary—religious or not—was not present.

Like Bazin and Schrader, Avila holds up *Diary of a Country Priest* as an excellent example of a transcendent style of cinema. In order to establish her point, she uses religious dramas like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) as an example of a film that tried to communicate the transcendent but failed because of its over-the-top style. For Avila, *The Passion's* excess makes it difficult for viewers to relate their day-to-day lives and experiences of grace with what is presented to them in the film:

> In Passion, Gibson relies on hairy devil babies, demonic crows, and cataclysmic events in nature to suggest the presence of the supernatural. In *Diary*, Bresson evokes

> the transcendent within the confines of everyday reality. Because the events in Gibson's film are outside viewers' experience, they can rationalize these events as belonging to an order of experience different from their own, and their emotions are consequently stirred only at the superficial level. Bresson's realism, in contrast, forces viewers to confront the transcendent in their own lives, stirring their emotions at their highest level of sensitivity. (Avila, 2006: 2)[48]

Avila, like Bazin, sees the success of *Diary of a Country Priest* in the way the film communicates the transcendent by showing the presence of God and grace in the everyday lives of the on-screen characters, which the viewers are then able to relate to their own experiences. So then, *Batman v Superman* does not fit into the styles espoused by Schrader, Avila, or Bazin, due to its narrative, characterizations, formal elements, and the way it handles its religious figures, imagery, symbols, and parallels.

Films are able to provide a unique type of immersion that is integral to their transcendent potential. The very elements that preclude *Batman v Superman* from being an effective transcendent film under Bazin, Schrader and Avila's frameworks have the potential to negatively impact the unique immersion that a cinematic experience can enable. Recall that Clive Marsh has noted that 'film-watching (or film-experiencing) is an embodied experience. There is a visceral element to it. It is affective' (Marsh, 2009: 264). The experience of watching a film in a darkened and isolated environment enhances the already affective nature of film that makes it, to quote Marsh again, a 'whole person' experience (Marsh, 2009: 264). The transcendent potential of a film is hampered when there are narrative elements jarring enough to pull a viewer out of the immersive environment that allows the viewer's worldview to intersect with the world the

[48] Interestingly, Avila's pronouncements against *The Passion of the Christ* do not account for the film's pedagogical, 'quasi-catechetical' role in some church communities or for the way the 'film has become a valuable medium for teaching about culture, history, and religion' on college campuses (Fredriksen, 2006: xx). The uses of *The Passion of the Christ* in scholarly and religious communities suggests that the film may have transcendent potential. An analysis of the factors that enable the film to have transcendent potential is beyond the scope of this thesis but is a promising avenue for future research.

film presents to them (a blending of horizons to use Gadamer's term (Green, 2005)). Recall Bazin's argument that overtly religious symbols have

> made for the success of countless films [and] are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them. Almost everything that is good in this domain was created not by the exploitation of these patent affinities, but rather by working against them: by the psychological and moral deepening of the religious factor as well as by the renunciation of the physical representation of the supernatural and of grace. (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 1)

A Bazinian transcendent style of film allows for religious images, plots, characters, parallels, and symbols when they have a reason to be there. *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Heaven over the Marshes* fulfilled Bazin's requirements for a transcendental style of film because the religious elements of each film had narrative significance and meaning. They were, to return to Bazin's own words once again, not 'an imitation of [their] divine model' but rather 'a repetition and picturing forth of that life' (Bazin, 2007: 59). Here, where *Captain America: The First Avenger* corresponds to Bazin's requirements, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* does not. While it is possible for viewers to be deeply engaged in particular scenes irrespective of religious imagery, I suggest that poorly handled overt religious overtones, parallels, themes, and symbols have the potential to be jarring and, as a result, to hamper an immersive experience conducive to encountering transcendence.

Interestingly, a number of reviews of *Batman v Superman* reflect Bazin's conviction. Take, for instance, *Christian Broadcasting Network*'s Hannah Goodwyn's attitude toward the movie. She recognizes its religious symbolism and the spiritual potential in the narrative, but ultimately laments the film's excess: 'The nature of superhero movies begs a certain amount of over-the-top action; but *Batman v Superman* overdoes it and by doing so downgrades the film's beautiful moments and clear and present takeaways of justice, redemption, and sacrifice'

(Goodwyn, no date: para. 8). Goodwyn's comment is reflected in the general attitude of other reviewers as well: the film was just too much.

Christianity Today's 'Holy Week, Batman!' (written by Alissa Wilkinson) and *The Washington Post*'s 'The cure for "Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice"? More Religion' (written by Alyssa Rosenberg) approach the film from a similar perspective. Wilkinson, a critic whom Rosenberg praises as 'the best critic currently working from a Christian perspective' (Rosenberg, 2016: para. 2) spends most of her review lamenting how *Batman v Superman* treats religion. She claims that the film is 'slathered thickly with a merciless onslaught of way, *way* overdeveloped religious references—nay images and statements that border on flat-out plundering the Gospel accounts' (Wilkinson, 2016: para. 3). She takes particular issue with Lex Luthor and specifically his dialogue about God, which she aptly describes as 'the kind of lines that make you back away from people on the subway' (Wilkinson, 2016: para. 5). Though Wilkinson's description of Luthor's lines is colourful, her more general complaint about how Luthor (and the rest of the characters) deal with religious language and imagery is echoed by Rosenberg.

For Rosenberg, the film's treatment of religion is often 'lazy, because it's not there to do anything, to make any actual statements about good and evil and God' (Rosenberg, 2016: para. 3). It is this critique that most closely recalls Bazin's warning about heavily relying on religious imagery, phrases, plot devices and the like for the sake of it—namely, that they can strip a film of any truly transcendent quality. Rosenberg sees the same problems as Wilkinson, but it is her idea for what could fix the film that is most interesting and worth quoting at length:

> I agree that the treatment of religion in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* doesn't work, exactly. But as I've gotten more distance from the movie, I've found myself wishing that Snyder had stripped everything else jumbling up his superhero extravaganza and talked about religion instead. There's no question that Superman's

> arrival on Earth, and the revelation of his existence and capabilities, would pose profound questions for both science and religion. Snyder's inclination in both *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* has been to keep those challenges to the established order in the background […]. But in a way, that decision ends up shrinking [both films] […]. So rather than giving us occasional crowd shots of political protests or members of a crowd reaching out to touch Superman as though he's an icon, why not make those changes the story? […] Tell a story like this, and you don't need any incomprehensible manipulation schemes, or any coincidences based on the name 'Martha,' because the characters' motivations actually make sense. (2016: paras. 4-11)

Rosenberg's suggestion to improve *Batman v Superman* echoes (probably unintentionally) Bazin's warnings and pronouncements; particularly his belief that a truly transcendent style of film is not created by religious spectacle for the sake of it, but through a deep exploration of religious elements and their impacts in the lives of the characters and in the narrative itself (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 1).

Matt Zoller Seitz, writing for *RogerEbert.com*, does not comment on the overdeveloped religious themes of the film in his own review, but he does spend the majority of the article lambasting *Batman v Superman* for being all form and little substance. He begins the review with a faux compliment:

> *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* is state of the art epic superhero filmmaking. That's a compliment if you prefer these movies to be ponderous, disorganized and glum, but a warning if you prefer tonal variation from film to film and scene to scene, and have a soft spot for storytelling that actually tells, you know, a *story*. (Seitz, 2016: para. 1)

Seitz's criticisms may not address religion specifically, but his disdain at the lack of a real narrative in *Batman v Superman* is similar to what Bazin and Schrader call for in their transcendental styles of film.

Interestingly, Seitz saw real potential in the early parts of the script which, for him, contain affective sequences and a cast of promising DC Comics characters. Unfortunately, this

hope is short-lived as the disorganization, clumsy execution, repetition, and general excess of the film becomes more apparent:

> Unfortunately, the script's early promise recedes as the movie unreels. *Batman vs. Superman* [sic] is a disorganized, lead-footed movie that carries itself with unearned confidence; you see every card it's about to play ten minutes before the movie plays it, yet Snyder doesn't just slap each one down on the table with gusto, he keeps pointing to it and telling you what rank and suit it is. (Seitz, 2016: para. 6)

For Seitz, the film's problems are accentuated by Snyder's attempt to compensate (or hide?) 'these flaws and others through sheer scale and volume' (2016: para. 8); a line that evokes Bazin's warning about excess (in his case, an excess in lighting and editing tricks to communicate the transcendent).

Seitz's main critique (the haphazard construction of the story) is echoed in reviews in magazines, blogs, and newspapers including *Wired, The Rolling Stone*, and *The Telegraph*. *The Telegraph*'s Robbie Collin goes so far as to claim that 'no major blockbuster in years has been this incoherently structured, this seemingly uninterested in telling a story with clarity and purpose' (Collin, 2016: para. 4). Unlike Seitz, Collin does take specific issue with the film's treatment of religion:

> The heavy religious symbolism of *Man of Steel* now looks relatively restrained: Superman himself has gone Full Christ Metaphor, and his life is an endless cycle of rescuing people (mainly Lois) and pulling expressions of pained beneficence […] *Batman V Superman* [sic] launches into its myth-making immediately and humourlessly, setting the tone for everything that follows. (2016: para. 9)

Two things stand out in Collin's statement. First: that he disdains the heavy religious symbolism throughout *Batman v Superman* and second, that he recognizes the heavy religious symbolism of *Man of Steel* and treats it relatively positively. In fact, earlier in the review Collin praises *Man of Steel* as a 'superb standalone Superman movie' (Collin, 2016: para. 6). A full analysis of *Man of Steel* and how it fits into transcendent film frameworks is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I

should note that its plot is much more similar to *Captain America: The First Avenger* than *Batman v Superman*. It is possible that *Man of Steel*'s narrative arc and character development allow the film to introduce religious themes in a way that enhances its transcendent potential.[49]

Nick Pollard, unlike Rosenberg, Wilkinson, and Goodwyn, seems to praise the way *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* treats religion in his *EthosMedia.org* review 'Batman v Superman: Philosophy of Religion'. He begins by appealing to the box-office success of the film to dismiss the harsh critical reception levied toward it and then goes on to praise the way the film wears religion on its sleeve and encourages viewers who 'have come for the superheroes, and the fights, and the explosions' to ponder its serious content and thought-provoking statements (Pollard, no date: para. 4). Pollard seems to dismiss critics who ridicule the film for the way it presents religion, choosing instead to suggest that viewers are less concerned than the critics were by these elements of the film.

There is some evidence that Pollard is right; some fans did seem to respond positively to the religious imagery found in *Batman v Superman*. Take for instance, a social media user who contacted Zack Snyder on *Vero* to unpack the religious significance of a particular montage:

> Love this scene and the Zimmer score. Sums up what BVS is about really. Clark trying to do the right thing but everyone just refers to him as some 'higher power' as they say and the Day of the Dead partakers put their hands on him, almost as if he's a God they could finally meet. Plus, the symbolism of Clark being dragged down by the people who died during his and Zod's fight, symbolized by people dressed as skeleton [sic], honouring the dead. Maybe that's just my overthinking—still, super-duper scene. (Vero user qtd in Davis, 2017(b): para. 2)

[49] Although I have chosen to forego a full study of *Man of Steel* in this thesis, it is a movie that lends itself to analysis regarding transcendence in film and provides some context for *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, which is why it is periodically referenced in this chapter.

This fan not only noticed the religious imagery in *Batman v Superman* but was so struck by it that they took to a relatively obscure social media platform (*Vero*) to reach out to the film's director for validation.

A *GƎEKS* contributor named Tom Bacon also appears to see the religious imagery that permeates *Batman v Superman* as a net gain despite the critical humiliation the film received. Bacon begins his review by claiming that 'the film was absolutely *soaked* in Messianic imagery' (2017: para. 1, emphasis at source). He then conducts a theological overview of substitutional atonement theories that are commonly used to describe the sacrificial and substitutional role of Christ in salvation before ultimately claiming that *Batman v Superman'*s treatment of Superman represents a less common interpretation of Jesus's atoning role

> known as 'Christus Victor'—Christ the Victorious, in which the Cross was a triumphant battle against the Devil, and against evil itself. Because this theory is less well-known than substitution, I'm pretty convinced that a lot of the critics haven't been able to spot it. (Bacon, 2017: para. 5)

Bacon's reasons for mentioning the theory of atonement at all are not made entirely clear, though its presence in his article seems to have at least two functions. First, to establish his own intertextual Christian religious capital (he knows theories that critics missed because of their own lack of knowledge) and second, to establish *Batman v Superman*'s intertextual Christian religious capital—if the film stays away from common Christian theories in favour of more obscure ones, maybe the film's religious significance is deeper than cheap religious symbolism for the sake of it.

Bacon then goes on to outline instances in *Batman v Superman* that paint Superman as a saviour figure, using Christian imagery to frame various events in the film as analogous to recorded Christian events like the Transfiguration and Jesus's trials in the garden of Gethsemane. He then suggests that Lex Luthor's presence in the film 'is often used to bring the Messianic

imagery to the forefront' (Bacon, 2017: para. 7) and goes on to frame Doomsday as the devil. Bacon cites three Biblical inferences that inform his interpretation. First: he emphasizes the importance of Luthor using his own blood to create Doomsday by stressing the importance of blood throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. He then quotes Friedrich Nietzsche who 'famously argued that man created God in his own image' (Bacon, 2017: para. 12). For Bacon, '*Batman V Superman* [sic] neatly inverts this postmodern trope, with, instead man creating the devil in response to God's presence' (2017: para. 12).

Bacon then moves on to interpret the final battle scene:

> Ultimately, Superman and Doomsday strike each other with fatal blows, in a scene that seems analogous to the first Biblical prophecy of what the Cross would achieve, in Genesis 3:15: '*He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'* […] The Devil, in Genesis spoken of as a serpent, will strike Jesus on the heel—infecting him with venom, and thus taking his life. Jesus, meanwhile, will crush the Devil's head as he dies. (2017: para. 13-14)

Bacon also unpacks the imagery of Lois weeping over Superman's death (which he likens to Mary weeping over the body of Jesus) and the placement of Superman's body over the wooden rubble out of which Bacon finds the image of crosses. He then claims that 'it's also no coincidence that this film was released on Good Friday' which he uses as a segue to discuss the imagery of the kryptonite spear in light of Easter along with the role of Doomsday's spear-like claw piercing Superman's chest as the fatal blow.

The fact that Bacon chose to focus on how Superman functions as a redemptive figure in the film is especially notable. At first glance, both Batman and Superman seem to embody a form of low Christology. In *Screen Christologies* Deacy writes about a humanization trend he observed in Burton's 1989 *Batman* as well as Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* (1986): 'Such a figure, in contradistinction to the superheroic antics of Superman, is suffused with personal

struggles and self-doubts; he questions his ambiguous character and behaviour and endeavours to confront his inner demons' (Deacy, 2001: 149). Snyder's Batman appears to be modelled from Miller's 1986 version of the character: he wears a similar armoured suit, has a similar conflict with Superman, is motivated by anger, hindered by his inner demons, and brings criminals to a violent form of justice. The viewer sees him pained by the suffering of his former employees, the state of Gotham, and his perceived powerlessness in the face of Superman.

Superman is similarly humanized by Snyder, which also continues a trend that Deacy commented on in *Screen Christologies:* 'Even the figure of Superman, moreover, who traditionally, "kryptonite aside, was nearly invulnerable"—an interpretation reflected in the four screen versions of *Superman* hitherto produced—even this most supernatural of heroes has [recently] undergone a significant transformation' (Deacy, 2001: 149). While Superman has god-like powers, Snyder's version of him includes moments where viewers see him conflicted, riddled with guilt, in love with Lois, worried about his mother, and confused as to what his role should be in the world. In short, Snyder's Superman is just as much man as he is super. Given this, it is curious that Bacon chooses to connect Superman to a high Christological conception of Christ as 'Christus Victor' (a redeemer who secures a pre-ordained victory against Satan) as opposed to likening Superman to an understanding of Christ that focuses on His sacrificial and substitutional role in atonement.

While some of Bacon's religious intertextual connections seem a little stretched (and may be found to be theologically suspect by some Christians), they do point toward both the rich symbolic imagery throughout *Batman v Superman* and the importance of a person's intertextual, cultural, and religious history as it relates to the transcendent potential of any film. This connection will be explored in more depth in later chapters. Suffice it to say for now that even

when the transcendent potential of a film is hampered by overdeveloped religious imagery, underdeveloped characterizations, a chaotic plot, and distracting effects and dialogue, the role of the audience members' own relationship to the transcendent is the most important factor governing interpretation and the possible realization of a film's transcendent potential—however minimal it may be.

Though I acknowledge that there are viewers who appreciated the ample religious intertextual breadth of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and responded to it in a positive way, I align myself with the likes of Wilkinson and Rosenberg. Due to the influence of Bazin, Schrader, and Avila, I (unlike Pollard) submit that though *Batman v Superman* may have encouraged some viewers to ponder transcendent questions and realities, its transcendent quality was ultimately limited (not helped) by its overindulgent and overdeveloped treatment of religion.

So then, it is clear that not all superhero narratives are created equal when it comes to transcendent potential. On the one hand, *Captain America: The First Avenger* avoids the excess that Bazin and Schrader warn about and follows (likely unintentionally) most of the narrative elements of Schrader's transcendental style while also featuring a saintly yet authentically human (and therefore relatable) character that epitomizes the traits that both Bazin and Deacy admire in redemptive protagonists. *The First Avenger* features an immersive, narrative-centric story that manages to include genuine moments of grace, sacrifice, and heroism with religious parallels that were included for the sake of the narrative and characters.

On the other hand, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* features a chaotic narrative that does not follow Schrader's structure and, more importantly, is full of overtly-obvious religious imagery that made the film so unpalatable for some reviewers that any opportunity for the immersion necessary to encourage reflection and realize any existing transcendent potential was

lost. Furthermore, the redemptive quality of the protagonists was stifled by the excessive religious themes, symbols, and heavy-handed, unnatural dialogue that marred the narrative.

In the next chapter I will be applying the same transcendent frameworks that I used to evaluate *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* to *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2009), a superhero film that differs from my previous case studies in three key respects: it is based on a standalone text, it features characters without a long history, and it subverts the superhero genre.

Chapter 5: *Watchmen* Film Case Study

The first two case studies in this thesis have applied the transcendental frameworks developed by Roy Anker, Christopher Deacy, André Bazin, and Paul Schrader to superhero films based on characters who generally fit classic heroic archetypes and have long and rich textual histories attached to them. This case study will follow a similar structure and apply the frameworks of Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy to Zack Snyder's 2009 *Watchmen* film.[50] That said, this case study is unique for three key reasons. First, the film is an adaptation of a standalone text. Second, although the film is about superheroes, it approaches them in a subversive way that ensures their characterizations are very different than those of Captain America, Superman, and Batman. Third, it features characters who do not have a long intertextual history. At the time *Watchmen* was made it did not have the same long history of diverse texts to draw from as the likes of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016)—both of which were developed by creators who could reference and borrow elements from the long transmedia textual collections attached to each character over their seventy-plus year histories. In the remainder of this chapter I will investigate how these differences affect the transcendent potential of *Watchmen* while analysing the film through the lenses of existing transcendent film theories by Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy.

In the methodology and literature review sections of this thesis I demonstrated that superhero stories are particularly suited to express the transcendent due to functional similarities that connect superheroes to deities and superhero narratives to mythical ones. These similarities allow superhero narratives to innately communicate transcendence without relying on the use of

[50] I have decided not to apply the work of Anker because in my first case study I established that his framework cannot be applied, or adapted to apply, to superhero narratives.

overt religiosity to do so. The transitive capabilities of superhero narratives were demonstrated in the chapter on the transcendent potential of *Captain America: The First Avenger*. To summarize, *Captain America: The First Avenger* fit aspects of the transcendent film theory espoused by Schrader (except those that depended on slow-cinema stylistic film qualities) while also exemplifying the narrative and character elements of Bazin's transcendental film style as well as Deacy's framework for effective on-screen redemptive figures. The film accomplished this by focusing on a saintly, relatable, and authentically human protagonist and avoiding overt, narratively irrelevant expressions of religiosity and the supernatural. This approach to religion and morality led many Christian reviewers, bloggers, viewers, and theologians to use the film and character of Steve Rogers as a pedagogical tool that exemplified what a Christian approach to war, romance, friendship, and heroism could look like. These commentators were drawn into the film and deep religious reflection despite the movie's adoption of very different formal elements than the slow cinema techniques that normally characterize transcendent films for Schrader.

Contrarily, the limits of the transitive capabilities of superhero narratives were illustrated in the chapter on *Batman v Superman*, which demonstrated that Bazin's warnings against overt religious dialogue, parallels, and supernatural displays are still applicable today. To summarize, though *Batman v Superman* had characters who were more commonly connected to religion and spirituality than the characters in *Captain America: The First Avenger,* the film's religious content was consistently derided as a forced, unnecessary, and clumsy part of the movie that ultimately negatively impacted the film-viewing experience for many reviewers.

In both my previous case studies I used tweets that either used religious language in relationship to superheroes, used superheroes to critique religion, or compared superheroes to

religious figures to support my premise that superheroes and religious characters, stories, and ideals are sometimes connected in public discourse. It is difficult to discern whether or not Captain America, Batman, and Superman were subject to this treatment due to their innate similarities to transcendent figures or their long history of texts that span decades (some of which were written during periods of time where overt religious expression, especially Christianity, was a greater part of public life in many Western countries) and includes a growing library of literature that analyses these characters in light of religion. Regardless of the reason, the question of what happens to a superhero narrative's transcendent potential when a superhero does not fit into a typical mould and does not have a decades-long history of texts still remains.

This chapter aims to address these questions while evaluating the transcendent potential of *Watchmen* in light of Bazin's, Schrader's, and Deacy's frameworks. I will begin by using the work of Joseph Campbell and Pascal Boyer to evaluate the origin stories of *Watchmen's* heroes. After demonstrating that *Watchmen's* heroes do not fully fit classic heroic archetypes, I will analyse whether the film fulfils the narrative requirements of Schrader's framework before conducting an analysis of how the characters fit into Deacy's framework. Finally, I will engage with popular and public discourse surrounding *Watchmen* characters and religion to demonstrate that *Watchmen's* characters are not connected to religion in public discourse in the same way as typical heroes like Superman, Batman, and Captain America.

Even though *Watchmen* is a licensed DC property, it is set in an alternate universe designed by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons (the creators of the original comic book series-turned graphic novel that was published in 1986 and 1987).[51] This background acts as an

[51] Though this chapter is not about the original comic book series (which will be addressed in the next chapter), I reference it because the film is a direct adaptation that is (apart from the ending) fairly faithful to the original narrative and characters.

effective setting that allows the typical superhero character archetype, epitomized by the likes of Superman, Batman, and Captain America, to be subverted. Definitions of superheroes are varied and often contested but two oft-cited superhero definitions by Joseph Campbell and Peter Coogan serve as a good starting point. Campbell's definition is more of a blueprint of a superhero's journey while Coogan's operates as a classic definition. Though neither Campbell's superhero blueprint nor Coogan's superhero definition are immune to criticism, both are helpful in this context because the previous superhero narratives I have analysed have featured titular characters that align well with the work of both Campbell and Coogan.

Campbell, in his seminal *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* conducts a meta-analysis of myths (many of them religious) that feature heroic characters across cultures and periods of history (Campbell, 2008). This meta-analysis culminates in what he calls a 'monomyth'; essentially a descriptive structure that underpins the myths that Campbell analyses. He is clear that not all myths follow his blueprint exactly and he does not claim or appear to intend a prescriptive use of his template. That said, he does argue that the basic structure of his monomyth is inescapable: 'For the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented, or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source' (Campbell, 2008: 1-2).

The enduring quality of Campbell's monomyth in modern storytelling suggests that it has a timeless element. Christopher Vogler, a prominent screenwriter and teacher, goes so far as to claim that Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* will prove to be one of the most influential books of the twentieth century (Vogler, 1985).[52] Although Campbell's original

[52] Although I would argue that Campbell's book did not become one of the most important books of the twentieth century, the impact of his theory is evidenced by the multitude of scholarship that connect figures, like classic superheroes, who follow his structure to mythic and religious figures.

monomyth structure is certainly still applicable to modern storytelling, I will be relying on Vogler's pared-down version of it for two reasons. First, Vogler's version was written with Hollywood blockbusters in mind—which makes it an ideal tool for analysing superhero films. Second, Vogler omits steps from Campbell's original monomyth that have Jungian and Freudian Oedipal aspects that are not useful to my analysis. Since all of Vogler's steps derive from Campbell's original monomyth structure, I will continue to use Campbell to supplement Vogler's refined version of the heroic monomyth.

Vogler's monomyth includes twelve stages (Vogler, 1985): 1) The story begins with the hero in an 'ordinary world'. 2) The hero receives a 'call to adventure'. 3) The hero initially refuses the call. 4) The hero meets a mentor. 5) The hero crosses 'the first threshold'. 6) The hero undergoes a series of tests and meets enemies and allies. 7) The hero enters the 'innermost cave'. 8) The hero endures the 'supreme ordeal'. 9) The hero seizes their reward. 10) The hero begins their journey back to the ordinary world. 11) The hero undergoes some sort of transformation or resurrection as a result of their experience. 12) The hero successfully returns to the ordinary world with the reward they have seized from their adventure (Vogler, 1985: 7). Polly Iyer, writing for the *Blood-Red Pencil*, created a graphic (see Figure 10) that illustrates Vogler's version of Campbell's monomyth.

Figure 10: The Hero's Journey (Iyer, 2019).

It is important to note that Vogler, like Campbell, does not claim that all myth-like stories need to follow the monomyth outline perfectly: 'I'm re-telling the hero myth in my own way, and you should feel free to do the same. Every story-teller bends the myth to his or her own purpose. That's why the hero has a thousand faces' (Vogler, 1985: 3). That said, a narrative that follows the structure closely will be more likely to cause viewers to link the characters with mythic ones (either consciously or unconsciously) due to increased similarities.

All of the heroes I have analysed so far generally follow Vogler's version of Campbell's monomyth. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* both begin by showing the titular characters' regular lives before they encounter a call to action (the death of Bruce Wayne's parents for Batman, World War II for Steve Rogers/Captain America, and Clark Kent's realization that he is not from Earth and has extraordinary abilities for Superman). Interestingly, all three characters sometimes skip the refusal step of Campbell's monomyth in most versions of their origin stories. This is something that Campbell made an allowance for in his initial monomyth structure. Writing about existing myths at the time, Campbell claims that 'for those who have not refused the call, the first encounter of the hero-

journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass' (Campbell, 2008: 57). This proves to be true with Captain America, Superman, and Batman as all three characters skip ahead to the next step of the monomyth structure where they meet and are guided by a mentor (Alfred for Batman/Bruce Wayne, Jor El and Ma and Pa Kent for Superman/Clark Kent, and Dr. Erskine, Peggy Carter, and Nick Fury for Steve Rogers/Captain America) and, with the exception of Batman, are aided by truly supernatural help (Jor El's guidance and the full onset of Superman's powers for Clark Kent and Dr. Erskine's secret transformative formula that Steve Rogers is injected with to become Captain America). Although Batman does not receive obvious supernatural help, in many versions of his origin story he does have access to a person who serves as a source for his weapons and gadgets, which Vogler acknowledges as a form of this step when he describes Luke receiving his lightsabre from Obi Wan in *Star Wars: A New Hope* (George Lucas, 1977) as an example of this stage.

In most versions of the various Batman, Superman, and Captain America origin stories the viewer/reader watches as the characters embark on their journey (cross the threshold) in a way that prevents them from turning back (often times this involves the heroes trying out their costumes) and ensures they enter into the next phase of the monomyth structure: namely, testing out their abilities and encountering their first enemies and allies. This step inevitably prepares the viewer for the heroes' main conflict, which often leads to their symbolic or literal death and resurrection.

In *Captain America: The First Avenger,* after Rogers cements his alliance with Howard Stark (Dominic Cooper) and Peggy (Hayley Atwell) he encounters the Red Skull (Hugo Weaving) while attempting to save Bucky (Sebastian Stan), his long-standing ally. Rogers enters

his first 'inmost cave' to endure a 'supreme ordeal' and rescue Bucky from the clutches of the Red Skull before returning to the base he was stationed at as a new version of himself with his reward (Bucky and the rest of the platoon that were taken as POWs) in hand. Rogers completes the entire monomyth before the first half of the film is over, before repeating most of it as a fully realized version of himself with the aim of definitively defeating the Red Skull and securing the source of his power. Rogers ultimately defeats the Red Skull, but only by sacrificing his life before being resurrected (in a sense) to help Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) assemble and lead The Avengers—effectively fulfilling the rest of the hero's journey a second time and building a foundation to do it again and again as needed.

In *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* the viewer watches as the two characters encounter each other as enemies, testing their abilities, before ultimately becoming allies to thwart Lex Luthor's plans and defeat Doomsday (a monster created by Luthor to kill Superman). Though the two ultimately succeed, they only do so through Superman's death. After the ordeal Batman realizes the need for a superhero team and lays the groundwork for the Justice League while viewers are shown evidence suggesting that Superman is not truly dead. In short, *Batman v Superman* also follows the rest of the steps laid out in Campbell's monomyth structure.

In my prior work (Atchison, 2015[a]: 93) I argued that the way many superhero narratives follow Campbell's hero journey archetype closely links them with mythic narratives and, as a result, creates opportunities for readers to connect these characters with mythic counterparts and subsequently approach them through a similar frame of reference. I suggested that this possibility would enhance the probability of readers and viewers consciously and subconsciously connecting some superheroes with religion and myth. In my prior two case studies I demonstrated that these connections take place by evaluating public discourse that used

religious language to talk about Captain America, Superman, and Batman, or used these characters to comment on religion, to understand religion, to critique religion, and as a pedagogical tool to teach religion and theology. The titular characters of *Watchmen* are not classic superheroes; they subvert heroic archetypes and do not follow Campbell's or Vogler's pared down version of Campbell's archetype in the same way that characters like Superman, Batman, and Captain America do.

The main characters in Snyder's 2009 version of *Watchmen* are Rorschach/Walter Kovacs (Jackie Earle Haley), Nite Owl/Dan Dreiberg (Patrick Wilson), Silk Spectre/Laurie Jupiter (Malin Akerman), Dr. Manhattan/Jon Osterman (Billy Crudrup), Comedian/Edward Blake (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), and Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt (Matthew Goode). Since the plot of *Watchmen* jumps right into a world at the brink of nuclear destruction, viewers are not shown the beginning of most of the heroes' journeys. We do not see what the lives of Comedian, Ozymandias, or Nite Owl looked like before they decided to become masked heroes. While brief explanations of the motives and inspiration of Ozymandias and Nite Owl are given through their dialogue and monologues, the film never divulges why Comedian opted to put on a mask and fight crime.[53] *Watchmen* does take the time to show Kovacs' troubled childhood and how his traumatic experiences spurred him to devote his life to ensuring criminals come to (a very rigid and violent form of) justice. Viewers are also shown some of Silk Spectre/Laurie Jupiter's childhood experiences with her mother (the original Silk Spectre) and how these experiences ensured she took over her mother's namesake and mission. The background that is provided for these characters is very limited and does not provide a thorough picture of their pre-heroic lives.

[53] Ozymandias/Adrian Veidt was orphaned at seventeen. In his loneliness and despair he felt a kinship to the great conquerors of Antiquity and decided to devote his energy to mastering all knowledge as well as his body to solve the world's problems. Nite Owl/Dan Dreiberg grew up idolizing the original Nite Owl. Since he was born into wealth he used his resources to arm himself with incredible technologies to fight crime.

The film also withholds the moments when these characters hear their ‘call to adventure’, refuse or accept it, meet their mentors, and ultimately cross the threshold into heroism.

The only character whose so-called origin story parallels that of other superheroes and mythic characters is Dr. Manhattan/Jon Osterman. Though Dr. Manhattan’s story is told in a piecemeal fashion through flashbacks interspersed throughout the film, it generally follows the first stages of the heroic monomyth. The film shows Jon Osterman as a regular man enjoying his day-to-day life before his transformation into Dr. Manhattan: he has a job (he is a physicist), a girlfriend (another more senior scientist), friends, family (a father who was a watchmaker), insecurities (he is nervous on his first date with his girlfriend), and seemingly no intention to become a hero in the near future. Then, a lab accident occurs that appears to kill him but ultimately transforms him into something superhuman with god-like powers (like the ability to easily transform and manipulate all matter) that the United States government eventually exploits for victory in the Vietnam War and strategic advantage in the Cold War. In fact, the government gives him the name ‘Dr. Manhattan’ to strike fear into their enemies through its association with the Manhattan Project. Though viewers are never shown Dr. Manhattan refusing his call to adventure or meeting with a specific mentor, the film does include shots of him where he appears initially uneasy with being used by the government (see Figure 11) as well as scenes where he is guided by the other titular characters of the film.

Figure 11 (below)

Image removed for copyright reasons

So then, with the exception of Dr. Manhattan, most of the main characters in *Watchmen* do not follow the first stages of the monomyth. This is due, in part, to the characters not being given a true origin story. If I were to analyse *Batman v Superman* as a standalone film while ignoring the longstanding history and many iterations of Batman and Superman, I would come to a similar conclusion. That said, texts do not exist in a vacuum and the cultural knowledge of characters with long histories like Superman and Batman ensure that every story that features those characters implicitly includes most of the first stages of the monomyth.

Though *Watchmen* does not follow the first act/stages of the monomyth, it does generally follow the second act/set of stages. The film begins after the protagonists have been forced into retirement through government legislation. The first glimpse into the world of *Watchmen* is the Comedian's murder by an unknown assailant, an event that leads Rorschach to investigate the murder. During the film's introductory credits a montage provides background information and the cultural backdrop that frames the narrative. The montage quickly takes the viewer through

decades of history and establishes that *Watchmen*'s diegetic world is one where the United States won the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon has won the presidency multiple times, the world is on the brink of nuclear war, and masked avengers called Minutemen and (later) Watchmen exist as part of society. A large portion of the narrative is shown through Rorschach's eyes and it is through his investigation that the viewer is introduced to the rest of the cast.

As Rorschach investigates the Comedian's murder, he begins to suspect that there is an enemy targeting 'masks' (vigilante heroes) and sets out to find and warn his former colleagues. As he conducts his investigation the viewer is introduced to each of the other main characters and watches as Rorschach begins to discover which of his allies he can still trust and which ones may have become an enemy. Rorschach and Nite Owl eventually discover that Ozymandias has been plotting to detonate a series of bombs in major cities around the world that mimic Dr. Manhattan's energy signature and will kill millions of people. They then approach Ozymandias' secret lair (their 'inmost cave') and prepare for the 'ordeal' of confronting and trying to stop his plan. When they finally meet Ozymandias they battle him and are clearly outmatched by his strength and skill; during the confrontation Ozymandias discloses that the bombs had already been detonated prior to the confrontation and that the heroes were too late. He also reveals that the intention behind his murderous plot is to unite the world against Dr. Manhattan and prevent a nuclear war between nations. Eventually, Dr. Manhattan and Silk Spectre join Rorschach and Nite Owl in their efforts to bring Ozymandias to justice, since they have all failed to prevent the destruction that Ozymandias brought against the world. During the climactic battle Ozymandias demonstrates that his plan has worked: nuclear war has been averted and the world is peacefully working together to defend themselves against the perceived threat of Dr. Manhattan.

Nite Owl and Silk Spectre react to this truth with anguish for the people who were lost, anger at Ozymandias for the deaths he is responsible for, reluctant acceptance that what has been done cannot be undone, and the realization that bringing Ozymandias to justice would undo the only positive aspect of the atrocities he has committed. Dr. Manhattan accepts what Ozymandias has done and agrees to self-exile to protect the world's newfound peace. Rorschach, unlike his allies, cannot accept Ozymandias' actions and refuses to keep quiet, even if disclosing what had happened would ultimately bring the world back to the brink of nuclear destruction. Dr. Manhattan kills Rorschach to stop him from exposing Ozymandias.

When the plot of *Watchmen* is lined up with the heroic monomyth it becomes clear that, although parts of the latter stages of the myth are followed, they are met in unconventional ways. Recall that the second act of the monomyth requires that the hero(es) undergo tests, meet their allies and enemies, approach the main conflict and return from it with a reward before entering the third act where they begin their journey back to their regular lives, undergo a transformation or resurrection experience, and use the reward they have seized in a positive, socially conscious way. Rorschach, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre and Dr. Manhattan are all treated as the 'heroes' of the story. Each one of them successfully determines who they can trust and discovers who they cannot. Each character is faced with challenges that showcase their abilities and growth and lay the groundwork that allows them to face the film's ultimate conflict. Rorschach's combat and investigative skills are showcased throughout the film and he ultimately overcomes some of his social failings in order to trust and work with his former colleagues once again. Nite Owl and Silk Spectre choose to take up their masks and reclaim their heroic identity and confidence, which they then use to team up and rescue civilians from a building fire. Dr. Manhattan breaks free from the electromagnetic haze that Ozymandias trapped him in to rediscover his humanity

and his compassion for the rest of the human race; this mental test allows Dr. Manhattan to use his abilities the way he wants to instead of being subject to Ozymandias' manipulations.

Although *Watchmen* follows the next step (Rorschach, Nite Owl, Dr. Manhattan, and Silk Spectre all approach the 'inmost cave' of Ozymandias' secret lair) the film deviates from the rest of the monomyth in a unique way: the heroes do not defeat the enemy, and millions die as a result of their failure. Ozymandias has won, yet the heroes' failure arguably saves the world from greater destruction—a reality each of them acknowledges and all but Rorschach begrudgingly accept. As Nite Owl, Dr. Manhattan, and Silk Spectre realize that they have failed to stop Ozymandias and accept that his horrific crime must be kept a secret, most of them reluctantly abandon the second part of their mission—to bring Ozymandias to justice. They (apart from Rorschach) survive their final ordeal and emerge with a reward (peace) to share with society but do so through failure instead of success. The road back to society for the heroes is not a physical trial; rather, it involves a mental wrestling with how the reward of peace was wrought and protected.

The third act of Campbell's hero journey involves the hero undergoing a symbolic or literal resurrection after enduring a symbolic or literal death in the final conflict. Though many of the heroes (the original Nite Owl, Comedian, and Rorschach) in *Watchmen* die throughout the movie, only one of them (Dr. Manhattan) is resurrected and only one of them (Rorschach) dies in the final conflict. Dr. Manhattan's resurrection occurs at the beginning of his heroic journey and functionally operates as the moment where he 'crosses the threshold' into heroic life. Similarly, Nite Owl and Silk Spectre experience a symbolic resurrection that operates as the moment when they cross the threshold back into heroic life: when the story begins most heroes are living in forced retirement due to legislation that forbids vigilante activity. As Rorschach becomes

increasingly suspicious of Comedian's murder, he reignites the passion of his former colleagues who undergo a symbolic resurrection as they re-emerge as heroes after years of burying their former lives and identities. Since Dr. Manhattan's literal resurrection and Nite Owl and Silk Spectre's symbolic resurrections happen near the beginning of their respective journeys their experiences do not fall in line with Campbell's monomyth. Rorschach, unlike Silk Spectre and Nite Owl, never retired from being a masked avenger. Instead, he stays true to his principles throughout the narrative and dies as a result without being resurrected. That said, the film does show that Rorschach had a symbolic rebirth before the events of the narrative unfold through a flashback. While investigating the kidnapping of a child, he discovers the identity of the adult male perpetrator and that the young girl had been abused, killed, and fed to dogs. This revelation profoundly affects Rorschach—his entire view of crime, punishment, and his role as a masked avenger changes at that moment, which leads to him becoming truly 'Rorschach'. Additionally, some of the final scenes of the film show the viewer that Rorschach's diary may be found, read, and disseminated—which would provide a partial resurrection of what Rorschach stood for if not a bodily resurrection for the character.

So then, *Watchmen* does not reflect most of Campbell's observations of what constitutes a classic, mythic hero's journey in the same way that *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* did. Based on the impact of a viewer's subconscious and conscious intertextual background it is possible that a film like *Watchmen* will be less likely to elicit religious and mythic associations than a film like *Captain America: The First Avenger* because of the relative lack of narrative similarities. When Bazin described the ideal transcendent film, he did not describe one with no religious or mythic narrative parallels; he simply argued that overt religiosity and relying on spectacle in lieu of content limits the transcendent potential

of a film (Bazin, 2007 and Cardullo and Bazin, 2016). For Bazin, the religious parallels of a film can be instrumental in 'picturing forth' grace and transcendence (Bazin, 2007). Because of this, *Watchmen*'s lack of similarities with the mythic monomyth may limit its transcendent potential.

In my previous research (Atchison, 2015[a]) I used the work of Pascal Boyer to argue that classic superhero characteristics help create potential for religious associations regardless of the narrative that features these characters. Boyer's work did not focus on superheroes or comic books but it is applicable to them. In my methodology section I provided a brief overview of Boyer's argument that supernatural (and therefore transcendent and mythic) concepts are so memorable and effective because they balance what he identified as the intuitive and the counter-intuitive (Boyer, 2002). For Boyer, these concepts, stories, and characters must be natural (intuitive) enough that we relate to them and do not dismiss them outright, while simultaneously being remarkable and counter-intuitive enough that we remember them (Boyer, 2002). Many religious figures balance the intuitive and counter-intuitive well.

Take, for instance, the Christian conception of Jesus Christ. Traditional Christian theology situates Jesus as fully human and fully god. He is human enough that He occupies a specific time and place in history. His humanity allows for the theological relevance of scripture verses, like Hebrews 4:15, which claim that 'we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one [Jesus] who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin' (English Standard Version). At the same time, He is divine enough to maintain a supernatural quality that allows Him to heal the sick (Matthew 14:14), resurrect the dead (John 11:1-44), provide sustenance at will (John 6:1-14), calm storms (Luke 8:22-25), and forgive sins against God (Mark 2:1-12) because—according to traditional Christian theology—He is God. The dual nature of Jesus Christ enables Him to have a lasting central significance in

many faith communities; He is relatable enough for followers to identify with Him on a personal level while still maintaining a transcendent distance that ensures lasting remembrance and significance.

I have argued that superheroes like Superman are excellent examples of characters who balance the intuitive and counterintuitive in a similar way to that described by Boyer (Atchison, 2015[a]). Superheroes who have god-like traits and origins are low-hanging fruit in this regard; the mythic associations they have the potential to elicit are obvious. Superheroes, like Captain America, who do not have such explicit connections to religious and mythic characters and stories can also fit into Boyer's mould. In my prior chapter I illustrated that the strength of *Captain America: The First Avenger* was the way viewers connected with Steve Rogers/Captain America and his journey; he was human enough to relate to and extraordinary enough to stand out and transcend what it means to be human on a regular level. Most of the characters in *Watchmen* do not achieve this balance. First, only one character—Dr. Manhattan—in *Watchmen* truly has a superpower. All of the other characters—Rorschach, Comedian, Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, Ozymandias—are merely humans who have trained and used their income to become masters of combat, investigation, and intellect.

At first glance, Dr. Manhattan appears as though he would balance Boyer's conception of the intuitive and the counterintuitive just as well as any classic superhero. The film devotes time to establishing who he was as a man before his transformation into a god-like superhuman who can manipulate the atomic composition of any living or non-living piece of matter instantly, travel through space instantaneously, exist in outer space, and experience multiple instances of time simultaneously. As the narrative progresses, however, it becomes clear that Dr. Manhattan's ties with humanity are tenuous and that he is more god-like than human. In short, instead of

balancing the intuitive and counter-intuitive Dr. Manhattan progressively tilts the scale toward the counter-intuitive throughout the film. So then, the key elements of *Watchmen*—the narrative and characters—do not mimic the design commonly found in mythic, religious, and spiritual stories and characters as espoused by Joseph Campbell and Pascal Boyer.

Watchmen also does not fully follow the narrative structure or film style that Paul Schrader identifies as the necessary foundation of a transcendent film. First, it is very stylized. Schrader, unlike Bazin, does not expressly forbid or actively discourage overt expressions of religiosity on screen, but he does warn against a filmmaker imprinting his or her personality onto a film. Instead, Schrader privileges a non-expressive style of film that *Watchmen* decidedly does not embrace. The film reflects Snyder's distinctive style and is reminiscent of his previous works (like *300* [2006] and *Sin City* [2005]). Second, the narrative structure of *Watchmen* does not line up precisely with the core narrative stages implicit in Schrader's style.

For Schrader, a transcendent style of film requires a banal and mundane starting point that defines the everyday life of the characters of the film (Schrader, 1972). *Watchmen* only adequately fulfils this requirement if the viewer immediately accepts the alternative reality that the film presents—a world where superheroes exist and nuclear disaster is nearly immanent. Rorschach, Nite Owl, and Silk Spectre are each introduced in a way that highlights how mundane their lives have become relative to their prior experiences as masked avengers. Rorschach is still operating as a vigilante but seems disillusioned with the effect of his work on the city. His beginning voiceover dialogue entry has an 'another day, another murder' tone to it: he calls the streets 'extended gutters' and refers to criminals as 'vermin' that will eventually drown in the accumulation of their own filth and misdeeds. He is alone and, in many ways, destitute. His day-to-day reality is both bleak and full of mundane atrocities. Dreiberg is middle-

aged and retired: he has all of his old adventuring equipment, but it sits collecting dust. He does not have another job and, apart from writing the odd journal article and visiting the original Nite Owl (Hollis Mason, played by Stephen McHattie), viewers are not shown or told what his day-to-day life consists of, though his demeanour and physical shape imply he spends most of his time languishing in nostalgia. Juspeczyk has become a heavily surveilled, kept woman whose sole purpose is to provide contentment and stability to Dr. Manhattan through her presence.

Each of these characters appears to be living a banal and mundane everyday existence within the world that *Watchmen* presents as normal. The problem with the world that *Watchmen* presents as it relates to Schrader's transcendental film style is two-fold: first, it requires the viewer to suspend disbelief in order to approach *Watchmen*'s world as normal. Second, the 'normal' world of *Watchmen* is defined by disparity. This makes it difficult for the narrative to fulfil Schrader's second stage—a moment where the characters' dull and mundane world is plunged into a profound disparity that is so great that it seems beyond human intervention. This moment, for Schrader, serves as the catalyst that pushes the protagonist into decisive action (Schrader, 1972).

In *Watchmen* the death of the Comedian could be viewed as this catalyst, but I argue that there is not a singular moment where the protagonists in *Watchmen* are plunged into disparity because part of their everyday existence is defined by disparity. Each character in *Watchmen* is isolated from the rest of the world: Rorschach continues to operate outside the bounds of human civility while the past heroic experiences of many of the other characters have made them keenly aware of the brokenness of the world they inhabit. The Keene Act (the legislation that forced vigilantes into retirement) contributes to the retired heroes' isolation and the sense of disparity surrounding them by preventing them from using their knowledge and abilities to affect positive

change. Effectively, many of *Watchmen*'s protagonists spend their day-to-day lives watching the world around them fall apart while suppressing their urge to intervene.

Moreover, the environment they inhabit is inching ever closer to nuclear disaster—a problem so large that a small team of heroes with no real powers (apart from Dr. Manhattan) cannot hope to solve it. The nuclear threat could serve as Schrader's catalyst if it were not present throughout the entire narrative. So then, *Watchmen* begins in disparity that is so pervasive and far-reaching that its very presence becomes mundane. Though the Comedian's death acts as an impetus that brings the characters back together it is not a large or impactful enough event to justify decisive action from most of the heroes—many of their former colleagues have met violent ends. His death simply leads the rest of *Watchmen's* main cast to reunite because of their grief and curiosity, which leads to their discovery of the presence of a more imminent disaster than day-to-day crime or an upcoming nuclear war. The knowledge of imminent destruction would be an effective catalyst if it had occurred earlier in the narrative. As it stands, Ozymandias' plan comes to light after the heroes have already begun to act.

The final stage in Schrader's transcendent style is stasis; a frozen view of the world that gives the viewer an opportunity to contemplate the transcendent reality or message that the film puts forward (Schrader, 1972: 76). In many instances, this static view of the world is very similar to the everyday banal existence with which the film begins. The final frame of *Watchmen* suggests that the film does end in stasis—it features Rorschach's journal atop other submissions on a desk at the *New Frontiersman*'s publishing office. By refusing to show the viewer whether or not the journal will be picked up or discarded by a *New Frontiersman* staff member the film withholds resolution (will Ozymandias' peace stand or will the scheme be revealed to the world?). In doing so, *Watchmen* gives the viewer an opportunity to contemplate the reality that it

suggests—namely, that morality is complex and that atrocities may or may not be justifiable by their ends. All that said*, Watchmen* does not return to a dull, everyday existence in part because that existence was never truly present and in part because it ends with the precarious promise of a new day of peace and world unity that had previously been unimaginable for most of the main protagonists. Furthermore, the lives of the remaining characters are fundamentally changed. Dan Drieberg no longer languishes in nostalgia and Laurie Juspeczyk no longer wallows in bitterness and anger. Instead, we see Dan and Laurie live their regular civilian lives contentedly. They reconnect with each other and their family and appear to be experiencing a 'happily-ever-after' ending despite the trauma of seeing their former friends and colleagues either become a villain, be murdered before their eyes, or retreat into a self-imposed exile. Consequently, the film ends in a form of stasis that does not involve a return to a dull, mundane reality. In short, it partially fulfils Schrader's requirements.

While most of *Watchmen*'s characters do not fulfil Boyer's balance, and while the narrative does not precisely fit Campbell's or Schrader's model, the film still has transcendent potential. This is reflected in the way that much of the narrative and some of the characters fit Deacy's framework. Recall that, for Deacy, an effective redemptive figure must be authentically human and flawed. For him, the propensity of *film noir* to present a world to the audience that is full of suffering, pain, and evil while also showing an alienated and authentically human protagonist navigate that world and confront their own weaknesses and vices allows some audience members to join the protagonist on their redemptive journey. Deacy argues that the bleak environment of *film noir* prevents the movie from simply operating as an opportunity for escapism. Escapist pursuits, for Deacy, rarely leave a lasting impact on audience members because of the dichotomy that such films 'set up between the fictional world of film and the

empirical world of everyday reality' (2001: 27). Contrarily, '*film noir* may be seen to engage in a highly focused and theologically constructive fashion with the estranged, disaffected, despairing and fragmentary quality of human existence *from which* [. . .] redemption can ever be a possibility' (Deacy, 2001: 37). While both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* include authentically human characters that fit into Deacy's framework, neither film epitomizes the environment that Deacy praises about *film noir* or the propensity for characters to fail more often than they succeed. *Watchmen*, however, includes characters and plot points that fit into Deacy's framework precisely.

Deacy claims that 'grim failure underlies most endeavours, with the *noir* protagonist presented as "resolutely small-scale, unheroic" and 'defeatist'" (2001: 41). His description of the *noir* protagonist encapsulates Nite Owl, Silk Spectre, and Rorschach in different ways. When Nite Owl and Silk Spectre are introduced neither are practising vigilantes and both are languishing—Nite Owl in nostalgia and Silk Spectre in a government compound. Both characters appear to harbour disdain for their current circumstance without initially showing any desire to change it: The Comedian is dead, the world is on the brink of war, and masked vigilantism is outlawed, so what is there to do? When Rorschach is introduced, he is operating as a 'small-scale', 'unheroic', and 'defeatist' *noir* private detective as well as a masked vigilante. He spends most of his time dealing with low-level crimes and using a self-made, strict moral code to justify doling out extreme measures of violence. His acts do not appear heroic and do not make a lasting impact: he is driven by a sole desire to impart justice where he decides it is needed.

While *Watchmen*'s plot does not fit into Campbell's monomyth or the narrative elements of Schrader's transcendental style, it does lend itself to Deacy's framework. Recall that 'grim

failure underlies most endeavours' for the redemptive *noir* film protagonist (Deacy, 2001: 41). The main 'endeavour' for Rorschach, Nite Owl, and Silk Spectre is to unravel Ozymandias' plan and save millions of lives. First, they fail to recognize that there is more at stake than a killer targeting masked avengers until it is too late. Then they fail to identify Ozymandias as the villain until it is too late. Then they fail to stop Ozymandias' plan and millions die as a result. The main narrative arc is driven by failure, but ultimately this failure is transformed into something with redemptive potential. In *Screen Christologies* Deacy claims that 'through the suffering that is epitomized by the Cross, therefore, a site of misery and hopelessness has been transformed into a site of comprehensive redemptive significance' (Deacy, 2001: 58) before moving on to connect the Christian redemptive function of suffering to the suffering and redemptive possibilities of *film noir*. The ending of *Watchmen* can be framed as partially analogous to the Cross in the same way as Deacy frames the suffering in *film noir*. When Ozymandias' plan to kill millions is a success, each major city he has destroyed becomes 'a site of misery and hopelessness' that is ultimately 'transformed into a site of comprehensive redemptive significance' when it becomes clear that the destruction he has wrought has healed international divisions and brought about world peace.

So then, it is clear that *Watchmen* fits into Deacy's redemptive framework and has redemptive potential. That said, the discourse I evaluate does not include any article that claims the author has experienced redemption because of watching *Watchmen*. Deacy is careful to note that the redemptive potential that is brought about by *film noir* may not be initially realized and communicated by viewers:

> With respect to *film noir*, any redemption such films convey may be somewhat obscure and uncertain in form—indeed, it is not the case that people tend to leave a film claiming to be 'saved'—but it is not unreasonable to surmise that occasional,

> spasmodic glimmers of hope are possible, and consequently, are a sign that the 'transformation' has begun. (2001: 58)

Given this, it is possible that the 'transformation' may have begun with some viewers despite a decided lack of concrete evidence to support such a claim. It is also possible that other aspects of *Watchmen* limit its redemptive (and therefore potentially transcendent) promise.

So then, *Watchmen*'s protagonists do not fit Boyer's description of what makes an effective mythic character because they do not balance the intuitive and counterintuitive well—Dr. Manhattan is too counterintuitive (too god-like) and the rest of the heroes and villains are too intuitive (too human). The characters and narrative also do not fit into Campbell's Hero's Journey monomyth or Schrader's transcendent style of film. That said, *Watchmen*'s general storyline and its authentically human protagonists fit into Deacy's framework. This, combined with the film's religious imagery and the way it asks viewers to contemplate transcendent questions related to the nature of morality and humanity, invests the film with transcendent potential. The transcendent potential of the film may be frustrated by the elements that prevent it from fitting into the styles and frameworks espoused by Schrader, Boyer, and Campbell, but it is present for viewers with appropriate intertextual and cultural backgrounds to realize nonetheless.

The opening credits include one of the earliest and most explicit religious references in the film, namely a tableau that mimics Leonardo da Vinci's famous 'Last Supper' with members of the Minutemen standing in for Jesus and the apostles. In the 'Last Supper' (see Figure 12) da Vinci depicted the moment where Jesus reveals that He is going to be betrayed by one of his disciples. According to *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* the apostles in the painting are, from left to right, Bartholomew, James the Minor, Andrew, Judas Iscariot, Peter, John, Jesus, Thomas, James the Greater, Philip, Matthew, Jude, and Simon the Zealot. The *Watchmen* tableau (see Figure 13) does not include all the figures but maintains significant likenesses to the

painting. In the place of Jesus *Watchmen* places a pregnant Sally Jupiter, the original Silk Spectre (played by Carla Gugino). On Sally Jupiter's immediate right we see the Comedian while on her immediate left we see her manager/husband (played by Frank Cassini) and Hollis Mason.[54] The body language of Sally Jupiter's husband/manager suggests that he is standing in for Thomas while the position (but not the body language) of Hollis Mason suggests that he is depicting either James or Phillip. Since both Hollis Mason and Sally Jupiter's husband/manager do not appear in many film scenes the meaning of their placement in the tableau is more opaque than Edward Blake's placement.

Figure 12 (above) and Figure 13 (below).

[54] The remaining characters in the figure are primarily the rest of the Minutemen (the vigilante heroes who serve as precursors to the Watchmen in the diegetic universe). These characters play very minor roles in the movie and the comic book mini-series that preceded it; as such, their inclusion in the tableau will not be fully analysed.

Image removed for copyright reasons

Initially, it is unclear which apostle the Comedian is meant to represent in the Last Supper *Watchmen* tableau; his placement suggests that he could be analogous to either John or Judas though he is missing the typical props, dress, and features that are associated with those apostles in the actual Last Supper painting (and others that came before and after da Vinci's rendition). Given this, and the Comedian's character and conduct throughout the film, I would suggest that he is meant to depict both apostles simultaneously. On the one hand, he betrays Sally Jupiter in a very serious and intimate manner when he attempts to rape her after a team meeting. On the other hand, Sally Jupiter clearly cared for Blake—which she demonstrates by reflecting nostalgically on their other time together and in her willingness to be with him (consensually) at some point after the rape occurs.

It is unlikely that the majority of viewers will notice all of the analogous details between the tableau and the painting. That said, The Last Supper's famous status combined with the extended shot of the tableau, which remains on screen for ten full seconds, make it likely that

some viewers would recognize the association.[55] The tableau's placement in the opening credits, which establish the cultural backdrop that frames the narrative, sets a religious tone that continues throughout the rest of the film.

Throughout *Watchmen* viewers are exposed to other religious images and parallels. The opening scene begins with Rorschach investigating the Comedian's murder while his voice narrates how he sees the world: namely one that is steeped in sin and in need of a saviour:

> The streets are extended gutters and the gutters are full of blood and when the drains finally scab over, all the vermin will drown. The accumulated filth of all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout 'save us!' . . . and I'll whisper 'no'.

Interestingly, this character-establishing dialogue positions Rorschach as a figure worthy of being a saviour but one who ultimately chooses vengeance and wrath over grace and mercy; all traits commonly attributed to divine beings in various circumstances. When Rorschach is living his life as Walter Kovacs he can be seen walking along city streets surveilling his former colleagues and enemies in plain clothes while carrying a cardboard 'The End is Nigh' sign (see Figure 14). The presence of this sign in light of the Biblical verses that often permeate his dialogue, the desire for justice and punishment that drive his actions, and the apocalyptic themes that are spread throughout the narrative create a strong connection to religious end-times images and motifs.

Figure 14 (below)

[55] Popular culture references to da Vinci and The Last Supper that occurred in the early and mid-2000s (Dan Brown's 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code* and Ron Howard's 2006 subsequent film adaptation) may have impacted the intertextual background of viewers and enabled them to recognize the reference more readily.

Image removed for copyright reasons

The religious and spiritual symbols and parallels in *Watchmen* go beyond specific scenes and thematic elements; there are also characters who, arguably, act as divine and semi-divine stand-ins throughout the film. The most obvious example of this is Dr. Manhattan, whose god-like nature is evident throughout the movie. Before Osterman underwent his accidental transformation into Dr. Manhattan, he was a physicist who also had a passion and acumen for watch repair that he learned from his father. Dr. Manhattan's connection with horology is notable due to a prevalent analogy used to defend a creationist theory of existence commonly credited to William Paley's 1867 work on what he termed 'natural theology': essentially, the 'watchmaker argument' suggests that the world is too complex to have been made randomly without a creator guiding the design (Himma, no date: sec 1c). Proponents of this theory claim that a world without a designer is akin to a watch without a watchmaker. Jon's connection to his father as well as his horology abilities are reinforced by the frequency of clock images that appear throughout the narrative and are often connected to Dr. Manhattan's character arc. When he goes to Mars, for instance, he creates a structure with an aesthetic that is dominated by gears reminiscent of the inner workings of a clock. Furthermore, Dr. Manhattan's ties with humanity directly influence the 'time' on the doomsday clockfaces that signpost much of the film: as he

cares less for humanity the viewer is shown civilization descending into paranoia, which increases the risk of nuclear war while Ozymandias is secretly putting the final touches to his own destructive plan. The clock imagery, as it relates to Dr. Manhattan, has the potential to serve as further evidence of his divine nature to readers and viewers familiar with the watchmaker argument.

Dr. Manhattan also evokes more obvious divine properties. Not only does he routinely take on an other-worldly size that evokes omnipotence as well as life-giving energy (see Figures 15 and 16) but his powers and the reaction of more mortal beings to him reflect a god-like identity (see Figure 17). Throughout the film viewers are shown that Dr. Manhattan can manipulate, transform, and destroy matter with little more than a thought while also routinely transcending the limits of time and space that normally govern human movement and perception. His mastery over movement is shown when he teleports himself and a large group of people (see Figure 18). His command over memory and time is shown when he demonstrates his ability to see his present, future, and past simultaneously as well as the present, future, and past of those in his immediate vicinity upon touching them. Lastly, his ability to leave Earth in an instant and inhabit an uninhabitable (for humans) planet points to his lack of humanity, while his physical form and past experiences point to his past humanity at the same time. In short, many attributes that Western culture applies to gods and demi-gods are present in the character of Dr. Manhattan.

Figure 15 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 16 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 17 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 18 (below)

Image removed for copyright reasons

Adrian Veidt's alter-ego of Ozymandias carries Ancient Egyptian religious connotations in both his choice of name, the construction of his hideout (see Figure 19), and his choice of a pet (see Figure 20). Throughout the film Veidt broadcasts his unabashed admiration of the likes of Ramesses II as well as Greek rulers like Alexander the Great; as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that the despotic tendencies of Alexander the Great as well as the theocratic

tendencies of Ramesses II have influenced Veidt's view of himself in relation to the rest of humanity.[56] His entire plan hinges on his confidence that he has the right to sacrifice the lives of millions to ensure peace and that he has the ability to manipulate and, to an extent, control a godlike character like Dr. Manhattan. Essentially, Ozymandias operates as though he really were a Pharaoh—a god amongst men.

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 19 (above). Figure 20 (below).

[56] To quote Joshua J. Mark: 'The government of Egypt was a theocratic monarchy [. . .]. The way in which the government worked changed slightly over the centuries, but the basic pattern was set in the First Dynasty of Egypt (c. 3150 – c. 2890 BCE). [. . .] Egypt's form of government lasted, with little modification, from c. 3150 BCE – 30 BCE when the country was annexed by Rome'. (Mark, 2016: paras. 1-3). Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE) ruled during 'The New Kingdom' era and held theocratic power over his people (Mark, 2016: para. 20). Alexander the Great allegedly called himself the 'Son of Zeus' and saw himself as a demi-god (Mark, 2013: para. 7). While he earned a god-like post-humous reputation (Mark, 2013: para. 3), Alexander's rule was not theocratic in the same way as Ramesses II as he was not necessarily viewed as god (or an agent of god) on earth during his rule: he simply saw himself as one of a handful of Zeus' mortal demi-god children and used that status to his advantage. While Alexander did not wield theocratic power, he certainly possessed absolute, despotic power over his subjects and ruthlessly suppressed uprisings when necessary (Mark, 2013: paras 12-14).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Interestingly, public discourse regarding *Watchmen* suggests that although the film's transcendent potential was realized by a few critics, this type of response was exceptional. For most reviewers, the transcendent questions *Watchmen* asks regarding morality and the religious symbols and parallels present throughout the film were not enough to overcome its shortcomings and realize its transcendent potential. J. Ryan Parker, writing for *Pop Theology: Where Religion Meets Pop Culture,* begins his analysis by comparing Snyder's decision to translate the iconic graphic novel into film to Dino de Laurentiis' decision to produce the Christian religious epic *The Bible: In the Beginning . . .* (1966). For Parker, the two efforts are similar because *Watchmen* (the graphic novel) 'holds something of a sacred status for its most ardent fans' (Parker, 2009: para. 1). Parker then moves on to praise Snyder's decision to stay true to most of the original subject matter, before briefly analysing the religious and theological significance of Dr. Manhattan. Parker begins by likening Dr. Manhattan's powers to that of a deity, before outlining the way the diegetic government's 'use of Dr. Manhattan parallels our tendencies to see God as always on our side in an effort to boost morale or justify foreign policy decisions' (Parker, 2009: para. 6). If Parker's observations about Dr. Manhattan were to stop here, he simply would have succeeded in illustrating how the world within the text treats God (or a god-

like character in this instance) similar to the way Parker observes God being used by governments in the world he inhabits and experiences. Though valuable and interesting, this type of observation is more of a commentary on humanity's relationship with the divine (and the powers and structures connected to the divine) than it is on the nature of the sacred or divine. However, Parker extends his analysis of Dr. Manhattan's relationship with his government handlers to reflect on the nature of the character's (and, by extension, God's) relationship with humanity: 'Yet, Dr. Manhattan has a mind of his own, and his vacillation between being involved in human affairs and removed from them raises interesting theological questions concerning divine providence and theodicy' (Parker, 2009: para. 6). This reflection, when combined with Parker's remarks on how government uses of Dr. Manhattan are analogous with real-world government uses of God, suggests that *Watchmen* has the potential to elicit profound reflections on the nature of divinity as well as humanity's relationship with and uses of divinity.

Paul Asay, writing for *Plugged In*, also recognizes the parallels between Dr. Manhattan and divine beings but approaches these similarities with a negative lens. For Asay, Dr. Manhattan is nothing more than a cheap imitation of God:

> Philosopher Voltaire once said that 'if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him' so it's fitting that, in the essentially godless world of *Watchmen* (most characters seem to believe that God is absent or, at best, too distant to care), we meet Dr. Manhattan. (Asay, no date (b): para. 8)

Asay, like Parker, then goes on to comment on the government's uses of Dr. Manhattan, but, unlike Parker, he is not moved to reflect on the nature of divinity and humanity's relationship. Instead he simply notes how society's attitude towards Dr. Manhattan within the scenes of *Watchmen* points to his godlike qualities. Asay uses the scene that shows the Viet Cong bowing to Dr. Manhattan when they surrender, dialogue within the film that explicitly links him to God,

and what Asay identifies as Old Testament themes to further illustrate how Dr. Manhattan is a godlike avatar:

> And Manhattan takes on a uniquely Old Testament-style aura at the end of the film, when humanity (mistakenly) thinks he's killed millions of people. Apparently fearing more 'divine' retribution, the world makes peace with itself and, when superhero Silk Spectre asks Nite Owl whether peace can possibly last, Nite Owl says, 'As long as people think Jon's watching us, we'll be all right'. (Asay, no date (b): para. 12)

Asay goes on to use Dr. Manhattan's father's watchmaker training, which he taught to Osterman before he became Dr. Manhattan, as another element that links Dr. Manhattan to God due to William Paley's 'watchmaker' argument. Interestingly, Asay—unlike Parker—also sees similarities between the other heroes in the film and divine beings, specifically the pantheon of gods from Western antiquity:

> Run-of-the-mill superheroes serve as lowercase-g gods—capricious beings who both protect and judge the populace, and whose failings harken back to ancient mythology. To underline the connection, the film showcases a hero-filled dinner party, with the participants aping Leonardo da Vinci's 'The Last Supper'. (Asay, no date (b): para. 9)

So then, Asay noted the same similarities that Parker did and more. Despite this, Asay does not engage in any sort of theological, moral, or spiritual reflection in the same way as Parker.

I suggest that, for Asay, the spectacle of *Watchmen* serves as a barrier that prevents him from engaging with the weighty substance of the film. Most of Asay's review is negative; he recognizes the importance of the original graphic novel but does so hesitantly and refuses to extend that praise to the film:

> *Watchmen*, the book, is a brutal, bleak and bitter tour de force. Named by *Time* magazine as one of history's 100 best novels, it explores philosophy, politics, theology and human nature. [. . .] *Watchmen*, the movie, retains that cruel sense of despair. At times, its adherence to the source material feels almost slavish. Yet it's a bit pastiche, too, layering in extra—gratuitous—sex, blood and gore just for raw, big screen shock value. (Asay, no date (b): para. 30)

It is this extra and gratuitous sex, blood, gore, and, I would add, despair that makes the film lack transcendent potential for Asay in spite of the rich religious imagery, dialogue, themes, symbols, and parallels that he notes. Asay advises his readers to avoid the film when he ultimately claims that 'as a book, *Watchmen* is messy. As a movie, *Watchmen* is a mess. In fact, I'll go so far as to call it dispirited, depressing schlock—both as a work of art and as a mode of message' (Asay, no date (b): para. 32).

As I illustrated in my prior chapters, Asay is more generous in his treatment of *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Given Asay's Christian, conservative background (as well as the similar background of his intended audience) it is not surprising that the abundance of sex, gore, and violence in *Watchmen* would outweigh any religious or theological significance that the film may have provided for him. Though many viewers may not be bothered by the same aspects of the film that Asay so strongly condemns it is a safe assumption that some will be, which ultimately limits its transcendent potential. Interestingly, this kind of excess harkens back to Bazin's warning against spectacle. Granted, Bazin was primarily focused on realism and religiosity in film, but I imagine he would find a giant, oversized, blue, omnipotent figure taking part in stylized violence and sex problematic.

Though part of Asay's discomfort with *Watchmen*'s spectacle is likely due to his particular moral views and religious beliefs, it is notable that many non-religious critics also took issue with the general spectacle of the film. *The Atlantic*'s Christopher Orr, for instance, identifies distracting and unnecessary excess as the film's main flaw. Orr begins his analysis by acknowledging that when he first encountered *Watchmen*'s story (in the form of a graphic novel in 1987)

> it was a minor revelation. The audacity of Moore's grim story of costumed heroes plagued by psychosis and alcoholism and lust, teetering on the brink between justice-

> seeking and sadism, was exceeded only by the style and imagination with which he (and illustrator Dave Gibbons) told it. (Orr, 2009: para. 1)

Fast-forward to the film version of *Watchmen* in 2009 and Orr elucidates a very different interaction with the text.

He begins by arguing that Snyder was 'loyal to his text to a fault' (Orr, 2009: para. 6), which ultimately led to the film not resonating with modern viewers. Orr claims that part of the problem is simply related to the cultural background of the text's creation and viewership:

> In the 1980s, *Watchmen* was the definition of envelope-pushing, a bleak, violent subversion of a relatively innocent genre. But over the subsequent two decades the pop-cultural envelope has been stretched outward more or less continuously, [. . .] At this point, we half-expect anyone in tights and a cape to turn out to be a dangerous lunatic. Shorn of much of its novelty, Moore's story often comes across as silly. (Orr, 2009: paras. 7-8)

Orr goes on to suggest that Snyder attempts to compensate for this narrative lack of novelty and shock value by over-sensualizing and over-emphasizing the violent episodes throughout the narrative. Orr points out that

> a throwaway scene in which Nite Owl and Silk Spectre fight off a mob of muggers is now augmented with snapped bones emerging from torn flesh. [. . .] Worst of all, these abuses are generally shot in caressing slo-mo with a lover's ardour. In Moore's comic the blood was plentiful but not beautiful; Snyder's film [. . .] strives grotesquely to make it both. (Orr, 2009: para. 8)

Orr clearly frames Snyder's stylistic touches as unhelpful additions to the film that do not make it more appealing but cheapen the meaning that the original narrative held for him. For Orr—unlike Asay—the problem with scenes like these is not limited to their existence or formal execution; he argues that the scenes lack the narrative weight and power they held in the comic: 'Snyder's film is incapable of the narrative gymnastics of the comic' (Orr, 2009: para. 9). The role of these 'narrative gymnastics' and how they increase the effectiveness of Watchmen's world building and the narrative's impact will be explored in the next chapter. Suffice it to say

for now that *Watchmen* (2009) fails to utilize its moments of violence and shock value to push the narrative forward. Instead of being important moments in the film, these scenes, for many critics and viewers alike, become distracting stumbling blocks that limit their engagement with the world, characters, and story that *Watchmen* attempts to convey. Orr paints these moments as 'appeals to adolescent testosterone' that are not enough to carry the movie, which eventually succumbs to its 'convoluted plotting, sensualized ultraviolence, [and] excruciating musical choices' (Orr, 2009: para. 12) and he is not alone in this view.

Ben Child, writing for *The Guardian*, conducted a meta-analysis of initial critical responses to *Watchmen* and found that critics were split. Child begins by acknowledging that reviewers from 'geeky sites such as *Ain't It Cool News* have been all over the movie ever since it became clear Snyder was planning a version faithful to the original comic book' before quickly transitioning to the main focus of his article, the 'many more mainstream writers who have been left utterly nonplussed' (Child, 2009: para. 7). He uses the comments of David Hayter, Alex Tse, and Kirk Honeycutt to illustrate how the premise and characters of *Watchmen* were simply seen as 'nonsense' that viewers who did not have prior exposure to the graphic novel found difficult to engage with or care about. Recall Gadamer's interpretative model from the method section of this thesis; he argues that the act of interpretation is a blending of horizons where the world of the text meets and melds with the world of the person consuming the text (Green, 2005). If the world of *Watchmen* is so counter-intuitive that viewers are put off by its spectacle, the extent to which they allow their world to meet and come together with the world of *Watchmen* will be limited.

Child then moves on to argue that 'the real disappointment is that the film does not transport an audience to another world, as *300* did. Nor does the third-rate Chandleresque

narration by Rorschach help' (Child, 2009: para. 9). Essentially, Child finds that the film is too alienating to some viewers to be immersive or to garner the emotional investment and imaginative buy-in required for the film to elicit an affective response. This failing also limits the transcendent potential of the film. If the characters, plot, and general film style are alienating, viewers will not relate to the world that *Watchmen* presents; it is simply too much (too excessive, too gory, too faithful to the source material, too full of spectacle) and too little (too unimaginative, too unrelatable, too unremarkable) at the same time.

Child claims that these weaknesses are common with comic book films because 'the ridiculousness of the storyline and style [is] borrowed from the original comic book' (Child, 2009: para. 10). For Child, this is the heart of the problem:

> [C]omic books are silly. They follow a form that is highly fixed and familiar to the reader, just as a James Bond spy thriller does. Moore's genius was to subvert that form into something rich and panoramic, creating a new form of fiction built on a scrapbook formula—*Watchmen* features extracts from journals, superhero memoirs and newspaper articles to gradually fill the reader in on its protagonists' back-stories [. . .]. Ultimately, however, if you don't like superheroes, and are not all that interested in comic-book tropes, then it won't be all that exciting for you to see them being twisted into new forms and represented on screen. (Child, 2009: paras. 10-11)

Although Child's point about a subversion of a genre not being appreciated by people who do not value the genre in the first place is fair, his argument can be countered.

First, the critiques levied at *Watchmen* regarding the ridiculousness of the plot and/or characters are not just due to the fact that all superhero narratives feature ridiculous plots and characters that are so jarring they ultimately cast a negative shadow over the entire film. There have been many superhero films that have enjoyed more critical success than *Watchmen* even though they feature equally silly characters and plots that find their origin in comic books.[57]

[57] *Watchmen* does not score well on Rotten Tomatoes with a 65% 'Tomatometer' and a 71% Audience Score. Other superhero films have scored much higher while others still have scored lower: *Captain America: The First Avenger* (80% Tomatometer; 74% Audience Score); *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (28% Tomatometer; 62%

Superhero films that have well-developed characters and engrossing narratives can receive positive critical reviews, engage viewers, and—as previous chapters in this thesis have demonstrated—spur some viewers to reflect on transcendent questions and realities. Second, it is no surprise that viewers already familiar with the graphic novel will be more able to connect with the world that *Watchmen* (2009) sets before them. This is not just because those viewers appreciate Moore's subversion of the superhero form. This is likely, at least in part, because *Watchmen* (1986/87) includes the worldbuilding blocks that Child identifies (journals, superhero memoirs, and newspaper articles) in abundance while *Watchmen* (2009) lacks most of these building blocks.[58]

In fact, the extent to which reviewers appreciated *Watchmen* (2009) appears to be linked to whether or not those critics accepted or were alienated by the world the film attempted to create. *SBS's* Simon Foster, for instance, praised *Watchmen* (2009) 'as an inspired vision of an alternate world that echoes but redefines our own existence' and 'a subversive yet bracingly humanistic exploration of the role of the superhero in modern literature. A supremely adult take on the fetishistic pull the heightened existence that life as a saviour of society creates' (2009: para. 9). Foster treats *Watchmen* to so much praise that his review reads like a press release with a title ('Watchmen review: The superheroes we need right now') that simultaneously separates

---

Audience Score); Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (94% Tomatometer; 94% Audience Score); Jon Watts' 2017 *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (92% Tomatometer; 87% Audience Score); Jon Watts' 2019 *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (91% Tomatometer; 95% Audience Score); Joss Whedon's 2012 *Marvel's The Avengers* (92% Tomatometer; 91% Audience Score); Martin Campbell's 2011 *Green Lantern* (26% Tomatometer; 45% Audience Score); Bryan Singer's 2014 *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (90% Tomatometer; 91% Audience Score). (Rotten Tomatoes scores are subject to change, but these were accurate as of 28 July 2020. See See Rotten Tomatoes website: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/ for up to date scores.) There are many more superhero films with 'silly characters' that are lifted from comic books that I could list with ratings that range from very poor to exceptional. The range of scores across the genre demonstrate that superhero films are capable of engendering positive and negative critical responses, therefore the problems that cause a superhero film to perform poorly must not be the nature of superhero characters and plot points.

[58] *Watchmen* (the graphic novel) is beyond the scope of this chapter. The importance of worldbuilding in *Watchmen* (and comic books in general) will be explored in more detail in the next chapter of this thesis.

Watchmen from the rest of the superhero movie crowd while linking it with *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008), which was a critical success.[59] Foster does not view the spectacle or violence of *Watchmen* as a negative aspect of the film. Instead, he claims that it 'is something special and deserving of analysis and discussion. [. . .] it is an undeniably unique movie experience—rich, perverse, violent and resonant' (Foster, 2009: para. 13). This is a radically different approach to the film compared to most of the critics I have analysed, but the article was not alone in its positive treatment of *Watchmen*.

Roger Ebert was similarly impressed with *Watchmen* and also compared it to *The Dark Knight* (in a much more direct manner) in order to link the two films in terms of their quality and importance to the superhero genre. Interestingly, Ebert treats the plot of *Watchmen* as secondary to the transcendent questions it poses about humanity and the state of the world:

> It's a compelling visceral film—sound images and characters combined into a decidedly odd visual experience that evokes the feel of a graphic novel. It seems charged from within by its power as a fable; we sense it's not interested in plot so much as with the dilemma of functioning in a world losing hope. (Ebert, 2009: para. 1)

Ebert does not praise the plot of *Watchmen*; he hints at how it is convoluted throughout his review, though these instances are usually offhand remarks sandwiched between praise—his comment about the film not being very interested in plot is an example of this technique. That said, unlike other critics, Ebert does not let this weakness define his experience with the film. He treats *Watchmen*'s weaknesses with a tongue-in-cheek humour that allows him to look past them and focus on what the film communicates as a whole. For instance, he encapsulates Dr.

---

[59] *The Dark Knight* ends with a eulogy by Commissioner Gordon (Gary Oldman) about Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart) where he describes Dent as 'not the hero we deserved but the hero we needed: nothing less than a Knight'. After the eulogy scene the film cuts to a flashback of Batman (Christian Bale) and Commissioner Gordon deciding to cover up Dent's heinous crimes. When Gordon's son (Nathan Gamble) asks why the police have to chase Batman when he didn't do anything wrong, Gordon responds by saying 'because he's the hero Gotham deserves, but not the one it needs right now. So, we'll hunt him because he can take it. Because he's not a hero, he's a silent guardian, a watchful protector, a dark knight'.

Manhattan's origin story in one wry comment ('Dr. Manhattan is contained in a towering, muscular, naked blue body; he was affected by one of those obligatory secret experiments gone wild' (Ebert, 2009: para. 4)), which he follows up with an instruction to the reader to 'never mind the details' (Ebert, 2009: para. 4).

This attitude seems to be key for Ebert; much of his review is positive because he 'never mind[s] the details'. Instead, he places weight on the transcendent questions (like what it means to be a superhero and how to cope with powerlessness in the face of world-wide destruction) that *Watchmen* asks and refuses to solidly answer. Most importantly, Ebert grounds his review on his experience of the film, which he claims is 'rich enough to be seen more than once. [. . .] I'm not sure I understand all the nuances and implications, but I am sure I had a powerful experience' (Ebert, 2009: para. 10). Ebert's experience with *Watchmen* is notable not just because it counters negative critical responses but also because he did not have the same kind of experience with *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Recall that Ebert approached *The First Avenger* with an admitted anti-superhero film bias that was ultimately overcome by the movie's general quality and strong character elements despite his irritation with its over-reliance on CGI (Ebert, 2011). *Watchmen* also overcame Ebert's anti-superhero bias but did so in a more powerful and unique way. He does not go into more detail about his 'powerful experience' but the way he describes it while also admitting that he does not fully understand the film suggests that *Watchmen* is capable of eliciting an affective, perhaps even transcendent, response from its viewers.

While Ebert advises his readers to 'never mind the details', his review does pay considerable attention to the details that liken the film to mythic and/or religious narratives. He begins by recognizing that *Watchmen* contains the power of a fable and ends by telling the reader that the film elicited a 'powerful experience' from him. Both of these bookend remarks imbue

the film with a religious and/or spiritual quality that Ebert expands on when he outlines the religious and mythic underpinnings of specific characters and scenes. Ebert, like other reviewers, clearly identifies the religious underpinnings of the characters. But unlike Asay, who sees these characters as unconvincing second-rate imitations of God, Ebert claims that *Watchmen* 'brings surprising conviction to these characters as flawed and minor gods, with Dr. Manhattan possessing access to godhead [sic] on a plane that detaches him from our daily concerns—indeed from days themselves' (Ebert, 2009: para. 9). Similarly, where other reviewers have identified the scene where Dr. Manhattan goes to Mars as a point of ridiculous spectacle, Ebert positions it as the film's 'most spectacular scene' and imbues it with a religious quality when he claims that it 'is [Dr. Manhattan's] equivalent to 40 days in the desert, and he returns as a saviour' (Ebert, 2009: para. 9). It is possible that Ebert's Catholic religious background impacted his experience of the film. He has been open about the influence of his Catholic upbringing on his moral development:

> It was from these nuns, especially Sister Nathan and Sister Rosanne, that I learned my core moral and political principles. I assumed they were Roman Catholic dogma. Many of them involved a Social Contract between God and man, [. . .] Through a mental process that has by now become almost instinctive, those nuns guided me into supporting Universal Health Care, the rightness of labor unions, fair taxation, prudence in warfare, kindness in peacetime, help for the hungry and homeless, and equal opportunity for the races and genders. It continues to surprise me that many who consider themselves religious seem to tilt away from me' (Ebert, 2013: paras 8-9).

Watchmen not only includes religious imagery and dialogue that can be connected to Catholicism, it problematizes many of the moral philosophies that Ebert developed as a result of his Catholic education. Given this, Ebert's background may have primed him to be especially impacted by the film. Ebert's review serves as a prime example of the film's transcendent potential, while the other reviews I have analysed clearly illustrate the limits to that potential due

to viewer alienation, a lack of worldbuilding, and underwhelming character development. Ebert demonstrates that the film can be greater than the sum of these parts if viewers are willing to look past them and focus on the spiritual qualities of the film and the questions it asks instead.

It is notable that Ebert did not take issue with *Watchmen*'s reliance on CGI given that he found *Captain America: The First Avenger*'s CGI-heavy aesthetic problematic. It is possible that the way *Watchmen* uses CGI can work toward its transcendent potential as opposed to directly against it. This is because 'speed ramping', the process of quickly shifting between slow-motion and regular speed in a scene, has the ability to operate in a similar way to Bazin's and Schrader's favoured long takes. The long take allows a film to slow down time and give the viewer the freedom to linger on a particular scene and take in its details (Schrader, 2018). Speed ramping effectively accomplishes the same aims by literally slowing down time while still moving the film forward through action. On the one hand, speed ramping violates the stylistic principles that both Schrader and Bazin base their frameworks on: it points to a palpable manipulation of the image, which Bazin would find problematic (Bazin, 2007 and Cardullo and Bazin, 2016), and it privileges action, empathy, and drama, which Schrader would find problematic (Schrader, 1972 and Schrader, 2018). On the other hand, speed ramping allows the audience member the option to study, reflect on, and contemplate the action as it is unfolding and grants them the 'democracy of the eye' that Schrader argues invites them to be a co-creator of sorts (Schrader, 2018). That said, Snyder's propensity to use speed ramping during ultra-violent action scenes also means that some viewers may be too alienated to take advantage of the opportunity that the technique presents to them to actively engage with the scene, as evidenced in Asay's review.

Kutter Callaway, writing for the Brehm Center's *Reel Spirituality* website, makes an interesting observation regarding the role of music and spirituality in *Watchmen* without

referring to the transcendent film theorists I have used in this thesis thus far. Instead, Callaway uses the work of Craig Detweiler ('a filmmaker, theologian, and cultural commentator who [. . .] is concerned with finding hints of the sacred amidst the apparent "darkness" of the cinema' (Callaway, 2012: para. 1)) to suggest that Snyder's heavy-handed use of music not only makes the film less interesting, but also less spiritual. For Detweiler and Callaway, *Watchmen*'s score is redundant due to the way the music often comments on specific scenes in a very straightforward fashion. Callaway illustrates this tendency by analysing three key scenes; the prologue (where Nat King Cole's 'Unforgettable' is played both diegetically and non-diegetically), the Comedian's funeral (where Simon & Garfunkel's 'The Sound of Silence' is played non-diegetically), and Nite Owl and Silk Spectre's sex scene (where Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah' is played non-diegetically). In all three instances the music serves a descriptive and instructive function that tells the viewer how to interpret the scene, thus robbing the viewers of the opportunity to interpret and relate to the scene on their own terms (Callaway, 2012).

The first music that *Watchmen* uses is Nat King Cole's 'Unforgettable' during the prologue and it quickly becomes clear that the music is emanating from the Comedian's television and is, therefore, part of the diegesis of the film. At this point in the film Callaway claims that the music

> forms an 'anempathetic' relationship with the images. In other words, it works to suggest that the larger world in which these characters live is indifferent to the violence and murder we see. In spite of the disconcerting action taking place within the film's frame, this mechanically reproduced music continues on unabated, seemingly unaware of the chaos in its midst. (Callaway, 2012: para. 8)

For Callaway, the music helps establish an essential aspect of the worldview that *Watchmen* presents to its audiences—'the prologue not only establishes the radical indifference of the universe that characterizes the remainder of the film, but it also orients the audience toward the

god-forsakenness of the film's dark and cynical world' (2012: para. 8). While Callaway praises this initial use of the score, he goes on to illustrate how its benefits are quickly undone when the source of 'Unforgettable' shifts so that it no longer comes from within the diegesis. When the source (the television) of the music is destroyed during the Comedian's struggle for his life the song not only continues, but increases in volume. For Callaway, 'by moving from diegetic, "source" music, to the non-diegetic realm, this music now places the indifference on the side of the narrator' (Callaway, 2012: para. 10). Not only that, the music's extra-diegetic source location shifts its function; it no longer works to communicate the nature of *Watchmen*'s world:

> It is now called upon to provide superfluous commentary that emanates from an ostensibly transcendent location. [. . .] From a place wholly detached from the film's space and time, we are told that the Comedian will be 'unforgettable,' that his funeral will be overflowing with the 'sounds of silence,' and that our response to human sexuality should be a resounding 'hallelujah'. (Callaway, 2012: para. 11)

Callaway claims that this kind of overt messaging divests *Watchmen*'s filmic world of meaning in two key ways. First, having music give meaning to the world from outside the narrative counters the 'godforsaken indifference with which the film begins' (Callaway, 2012: para. 12). Second, and more generally, overtly explanatory music does not invest filmic images with transcendent meaning; instead, this use of music 'actually precludes the possibility of discovering [the] transcendence' (Callaway, 2012: para. 13) that might otherwise be available to uncover in the film.

Interestingly, Callaway's criticism mirrors Schrader's claim that approaching music from a slow cinema perspective can enhance the transcendent potential of a film. According to Schrader, slow cinema 'favours diegetic sound' and resists predictable uses of non-diegetic sound (Schrader, 2018: 14). Non-diegetic music is an excellent way to 'control film time' (Schrader, 2018: 14) as well as emotions (Schrader, 2018: 17) and works together with other

filmic techniques to tell the viewer where they should look, how they should feel, and what is supposed to be important to them (Schrader, 2018). Given this, Schrader claims that 'by delaying edits, not moving the camera, forswearing music cues, not employing coverage, and heightening the mundane, transcendental style creates a sense of unease the viewer must resolve' (Schrader, 2018: 3). To be fair, none of the films I have analysed in this chapter use the withholding techniques that Schrader praises as effective ways to communicate the transcendence. That said, it is notable that the excessive guidance provided by *Watchmen*'s musical cues was enough for Callaway to claim that the film's use of music precludes viewers from discovering the transcendence the film may contain (Callaway, 2012: para. 13).

So then, although *Watchmen* has the potential to elicit a transcendent experience from some viewers, this potential is limited. The way the film and the characters fit into Deacy's framework imbue *Watchmen* with a transcendent capacity that some audience members may be able to take in. Ebert's review of the movie suggests that he may have realized its transcendent potential: he had a powerful experience because of the film and claimed to sense a power within it similar to that of a fable (Ebert, 2009). *Watchmen* also contains a plethora of religious references and parallels that could increase its transcendent potential for viewers with certain intertextual and cultural backgrounds. That said, the film's ultimate transcendent potential is hampered by a plethora of issues including its musical score and potentially alienating violent spectacle. *Watchmen*'s characters do not balance the intuitive and counter intuitive that Boyer sees as essential for supernatural figures (like superheroes and mythic characters) and it does not successfully follow the heroic monomyth that defines much of its competition. Furthermore, the film does not follow the transcendental styles espoused by Schrader and Bazin. Although, by their nature, superhero films cannot truly follow these frameworks as they were intended,

Watchmen deviates from the frameworks more than either *Captain America: The First Avenger* or *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* did.

In the next chapter I will investigate the transcendent potential of the comic book version of *Watchmen*. Through this final case study I will explore how the form of the comic book enables the medium to express the transcendent through unique formal means. Since *Watchmen* is regarded as a largely faithful adaptation of the original comic book series, the comic book form of the narrative is a perfect way to investigate whether or not the comic book medium is enough to overcome the pitfalls that hampered the filmic version's transcendent potential.

Chapter 6: *Watchmen* Comic Case Study

This thesis has been an attempt to follow in the footsteps of the theorists I used in my literature review and methodology chapters in order to demonstrate that the boundaries separating the sacred from the profane are quite fluid. I have argued that *hierophanies* can occur in any number of places, media, and spaces, and have used scholars who specialize in a variety of fields including film, language, hermeneutics, superheroes, religion, and myth to demonstrate that the transcendent can not only find its way into unexpected medial spaces but also unexpected narrative types, like the superhero narrative. In my case study of Snyder's 2009 filmic version of *Watchmen* I demonstrated that the film had many aspects that enabled it to elicit potential transcendent reactions and experiences from its viewers. I also argued that these aspects were not enough to overcome the film's perceived weaknesses, which ultimately limited its transcendent potential. In this chapter I will illustrate how the unique medial qualities of comic books allow them to enhance the transcendent potential of *Watchmen*. Before I begin my full analysis it is important to note that I am not arguing that comic books are inherently better at housing transcendent narratives than film. I am simply suggesting that some narratives, like *Watchmen*, are better suited to the page than the screen just as some other narratives are better suited to appear in a film format.

In 'Adapting *Watchmen'* Ian Hague uses *Watchmen* (1986/87, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons) to conduct a case study to illustrate the challenges that arise when adapting a comic book narrative into a film.[60] Hague chooses to use *Watchmen* instead of other superhero comic book narratives because

[60] Although Hague specifically focuses on the challenges of adapting *Watchmen* into a film, his points could also apply to the current (at the time of writing) television series. Analysing the television series is beyond the scope of

> the formal characteristics of the comics page are critical to understanding the *Watchmen* series. Indeed, Alan Moore has gone so far as to assert that his comics 'were written to be impossible to reproduce in terms of cinema' (*The Culture Show* 2006) and it is therefore unsurprising that these elements are the areas that are arguably the most problematic in Zack Snyder's film adaptation of *Watchmen*. (Hague, 2012: 39)

Hague uses the work of Pascal Lefevre to outline four aspects of comic book story telling that make it particularly difficult to translate some comic narratives into film-friendly versions: the addition and deletion process that is required in any adaptation; the unique attributes of page layouts and structures and the equally unique attributes of the film screen; the difficulties that can be encountered when translating drawn images into filmed images; and lastly, the problem of sound (Lefevre, 2007: 3-4 qtd. in Hague, 2012: 40).

The four difficult aspects of adapting a comic book narrative into a film that Lefevre identifies and Hague uses are not all equally problematic, especially when they are considered alongside Snyder's *Watchmen*. Take for instance the problem of what to include and what to exclude. Clearly, this difficulty is present in any adaptation between any two media, but it can be especially problematic with a comic book film because of the serial nature of many comics, especially those featuring popular superheroes. Hague recognizes this and argues that it is one of the primary reasons so many superhero films are based on cherry picked material that creates a new narrative (Hague, 2012: 41). For Hague, *Watchmen* occupies a space in between a standalone text and a serial narrative, which does not make it an ideal candidate for a faithful adaptation but does open up the possibility (Hague, 2012: 41-42). I disagree with Hague's assertion that *Watchmen* does not count as a single standalone text. Although it has been treated to comic book prequels and sequels as well as an alternate reality sequel in the form of a television serial, neither of these additional texts existed when Snyder's *Watchmen* was released.

---

this chapter but is a promising area to explore for future research.

A graphic novel comprising the twelve individual comic book issues that made up the entire narrative (at that time) was the most common way to encounter the comic book version of the story while the film was in production. I argue that, for all intents and purposes, *Watchmen* existed as a standalone text that could, at least theoretically, be faithfully adapted. Interestingly, although Hague classifies *Watchmen* as falling somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of texts that make up serialized and standalone narratives, he does acknowledge that it can be treated as a standalone text for the sake of adapting the storyline. That said, the issue of addition and deletion is still present because, as I will go on to demonstrate, *Watchmen* is more than just its basic narrative. As such, faithfully adapting the narrative of *Watchmen* into a film does not mean that the transcendent potential of the comic book narrative will be faithfully transplanted into the film watching experience.

As Hague rightly points out, the majority of *Watchmen'*s narrative was included in the film (Hague, 2012: 42). That said, it is important to remember that the transcendent potential of *Watchmen* is linked to much more than the comic's original narrative. Hague also touches on the importance of the non-narrative elements of *Watchmen* when he quotes Alan Moore's assertion that the work's importance lies in '"the storytelling techniques and the way that me and Dave [Gibbons] were altering the range of what it was possible to do in comics; this new way that we'd stumbled upon of telling a comic book story'" (Munson and O'Neill, 2009: 29) [. . .]' (Hague, 2012: 42-43). *Watchmen* is a formally complex work, and we should therefore be cautious in asserting that it is possible to adapt it for cinema solely on the basis that its storyline can make the jump from page to screen. *Watchmen* could be viewed as being about the medial qualities of the comic book as much as it is about the narrative or characters themselves. In the film case study that immediately precedes this chapter I conducted an in-depth analysis of

Watchmen's narrative and characters. To avoid unnecessary repetition I will spend the remainder of this chapter focusing on the narrative and character elements that were left out of or changed in the film as well as the specific comic book qualities that, I argue, uniquely enhance the transcendent potential of both the narrative and the characters.

In my earlier case study I argued that the lack of effective world building in *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder) limited the film's ability to immerse audiences, which limited their ability to suspend disbelief and, to borrow Gadamer's phrasing once again, allow their worldview/horizon to meet with the worldview/horizon that *Watchmen* (2009) presented to them (Green, 2005). Unlike the film, the comic book version of the narrative excels in worldbuilding. One of the ways Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons create a layered nuanced world in the pages of *Watchmen* is by focusing more heavily on side characters and narratives than the film does. Part of the difficulty in translating the complete and coherent world that *Watchmen* (1986/87) presents to the reader into film form is related to the problem of sound that Lefevre and Hague identify as a roadblock to any comic book adaptation.

To use Hague's words:

> To consider the complexities of sound I would like to turn to one of the aspects of *Watchmen* that Alan Moore considers to be unfilmable, namely 'split-level narratives with a little kid reading a comic book, a news vendor going into a right-wing rant next to him and something else going on in the background in captions, all at the same time and interrelated' (Munson and O'Neill 2009: 29). (Hague, 2012: 47)

The amount of focus that *Watchmen* (1986/1987) gives to individuals who have no discernible effect on the main storyline hints that the world within the text is real and alive and goes beyond the pages with which the reader is interacting. The snippets of dialogue from background characters that *Watchmen* (1987/86) includes place the main characters in a community that

influences and resists their worldviews. This background dialogue gives the reader a taste of the cultural zeitgeist within *Watchmen*, providing a depth which is not translated into the film.

The split-level narratives that Hague is referring to consist of a comic book within *Watchmen* called the *Tales of the Black Freighter* that parallels the narrative of the main story and serves a dual purpose. First, it reiterates the narrative's themes, messages, and complex moral ambiguity that define *Watchmen* while avoiding the kind of explicit repetition that can become monotonous to the reader. Second, it serves as a worldbuilding tool that draws the reader into the story. The boy reading the *Tales of the Black Freighter* is encountering and grappling with a similar message and story that *Watchmen*'s readers are engaging with; the kid, in a way, allows readers to transplant themselves into the narrative itself, which can increase engagement. This can also increase the transcendent potential of the narrative, which I will explore in more detail further on in this chapter.

Snyder did not include the *Tales of the Black Freighter* in the main version of the film. Instead, it was relegated to a standalone DVD of the same title, was eventually included in special cuts and editions of *Watchmen* and is also widely available on YouTube. Even if every person who ever bought *Watchmen* purchased the version that includes an extra disc with the *Tales of the Black Freighter* story*,* this particular worldbuilding function of the comic would be lost because it would be encountered as a separate story instead of being perfectly woven into the fabric of the film. There was also a special 'Ultimate Cut' edition of the film released that did integrate the *Tales of the Black Freighter,* but this version is not the one that most viewers will encounter.[61]

[61] Interestingly, Snyder does not prefer the 'Ultimate Cut' that integrates that *Tales of the Black Freighter* into the film. In his words: 'for me, the Director's Cut without The Black Freighter is sort of—because it was never designed—I wanted to do The Black Freighter, I wanted to do it, but we didn't really design it to be intercut with the rest of the film, so we kind of had to jerry-rig it in, and though it goes in pretty nicely, I never felt like it was 100%

Other worldbuilding elements that Snyder did not include in the film version of *Watchmen* include ancillary materials like diegetic journal entries and articles. In the graphic novel version of the narrative these materials appear at the end of each original issue and serve as dividers. Although some readers would certainly skip over these ancillary materials, their worldbuilding function still persists. For readers who read the materials they give a greater depth to and understanding of the characters and the world they inhabit; for readers who skip over the material they still operate as evidence that the world extends past the main narrative.[62]

For Hague, it is inherently impossible to translate these critical worldbuilding blocks into a film adaptation:

> Given that this material sits quite comfortably within the comics, the decision to exclude it from the film of *Watchmen* suggests a fundamental difference between the two media. The sequences I discussed earlier play with the idea of tensions between words and images, but they also emphasize the possibility for tensions within these fields. There is, for example a tension between the narration boxes from the *Tales of the Black Freighter* and the newsvendor's speech bubbles. This is easy to represent in comics through visual difference. The reader will not confuse the two commentary tracks because they are visually distinctive. In film, where most narration and speech is presented aurally, this is more difficult to imply because the *ontological* distinction between the two cannot be easily indicated to the listener. (Hague, 2012: 51)

I would extend the problem of sound to background conversations between background characters. Although film viewers would certainly be able to hear these conversations it would be difficult (at least during the initial viewing of a film) to discern the content of both the main and the background conversations as they happen. Where the multiple conversations, commentary tracks, and narratives form a tension between the words and images on the pages of the comics they would compete for attention if translated to film. There simply is not the

---

completely organic' (Snyder qtd in Goldberg, 2016: para. 3).

[62] I should note that film versions of these ancillary materials are available through YouTube but their place outside of the film watching experience limits their worldbuilding potential while the same comic book versions of the materials are physically located inside the comics themselves.

opportunity to linger and discern which conversation belongs to which character and which commentary track belongs to which narrative. And so Zack Snyder faced a difficult challenge if his aim was to faithfully adapt the graphic novel version of *Watchmen*: he could omit these critical worldbuilding blocks due to medial difficulties or he could include them and risk cluttered scenes that have the potential to cause confusion. Either way, the transcendent potential of the film would be hampered due to either a lack of convincing worldbuilding or confusion that pulls the audience out of their engagement with the film. Ultimately, he decided (for the most part) to excise these moments from the film version of the narrative.

So far, I have explored the impact of the addition and deletion process and the problem of sound as it relates to the transcendent potential of both the film and the comic book versions of *Watchmen*. The other two comic book adaptation difficulties that Hague borrows from Lefevre are the unique page and screen characteristics that separate comics from film and the challenge of translating drawn images into filmed ones. These are, I suggest, the most important aspects that impact what kind of transcendent narratives may thrive in comic book form and what kind may thrive in film form.

In ‘Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections’ (2010) Darby Orcutt goes so far as to claim that some ‘form of comics expression exists within the broad content of nearly every major contemporary religious tradition’ (Orcutt, 2010: 93). Depending on how broadly one defines comics as a medium, it could and has been argued that the history of comics is closely connected with the evolution of religious expression. Writers and theorists, like Christopher Knowles and Orcutt, who make these connections, cite Egyptian hieroglyphics, early monastic manuscripts, the engraved plates of the English mystic William Blake, and the woodcut stories of medieval European saints as just a few historical examples that appear to lend credence to the argument

that there has been an association between religious expression and comic books for quite some time (Knowles, 2007: 1-2). The connections these writers make may simply point to correlational similarities due to cultural contexts and modes of production (many people could not read, so illustrations depicting religious stories may have been necessary and books were quite costly status markers so it is not surprising that religious books of high status would be girded with beautiful illustrations), but they also may point to the possibility that the comics medium has qualities which, when combined with specific narrative forms, may make it especially suited to the transcendent.

Knowles makes such a claim when he suggests that there is 'something about the medium of the comic book that seems to be the best incubator for our substitute gods' (Knowles, 2007: 12). Recall that Douglas Rushkoff (author of an explicitly religious comic book series called *Testament* [Vertigo, 2006–2008]) claims that comic books have a 'unique ability [. . .] to communicate, simulate, and perhaps even actualize transcendence' (Rushkoff, 2010: xii). Rushkoff singles out the 'gutter' (a technical term that refers to the white spaces that separate each panel in a comic book narrative) as a specific structural component of the comic book that lends itself to a mythical or religious reading. As I mentioned on page 104, Evan Thomas underscores Rushkoff's claim by suggesting that the gutter allows comics to access a unique 'plane of meaning' (Thomas, 2010: 157). Rushkoff suggests that the gutter signifies a symbolic place for the emergence of the divine. He argues that the gutters allow the gods to reside outside of the finite world contained by the panel lines of the narrative while still allowing them to impact the meaning of the story in fantastic ways (Rushkoff, 2010: x).

For Rushkoff, it is precisely the gutters that make the comic book an ideal residence for the divine. Interestingly, he illustrates this point in his own work by filling the gutters with

images of the divine interacting with the other characters in mysterious ways. In this way he attempts to use the comic book medium to mimic a religious experience, which he identifies as a moment that 'consists of a shift in awareness from the particular to the universal—[...] It means to make human beings who are trapped within panels aware of the gutter beyond—for just a fleeting moment, in the obscure shadows of inference' (Rushkoff, 2010: xii). Rushkoff's use of the gutter is fairly unique in the comics world; not many comics use the gutter to house the divine, after all. That said, the way he pushes the medium to show how it has a 'unique ability [...] to communicate, simulate, and perhaps even actualize transcendence' (Rushkoff, 2010: xii) demonstrates the potential of the comic book to function as an alternative site of intersection for the carnal and the heavenly, the finite and the infinite, the secular and the divine.[63]

In addition to demonstrating how the gutter can serve as a useful tool for explicitly religious narratives, Rushkoff also draws attention to the way the gutter enlists the reader of a comic book to become, in effect, a co-creator. His claim that 'a comic requires a leap of faith from its readers every time they move from one panel to the next [... and that] the reader is asked to participate [through this process]' (Rushkoff, 2010: x) parallels similar claims made by comics practitioner turned theorist Scott McCloud. Recall that in *Understanding Comics* McCloud singles out the gutter as an essential physical element that enables comics to use the phenomenon he calls 'closure' to enlist audience members to become co-creators of the comic book narrative itself (McCloud, 1993: 65). According to McCloud, closure is the act of 'observing the parts but perceiving the whole' (McCloud, 1993: 63). Although he does note that all aspects of human life and all media forms require people to use closure, McCloud insists that

[63] Most of this paragraph was originally published in *Religião, Mídia e Cultura* following a conference of the same title and reappears in this thesis with permission. See Atchison, 2015[a] for more information. I have also included a copy of this article in Appendix D.

the presence of the gutter in the comic book forces it to rely on closure more than any other medium (McCloud, 1993: 63 – 65) and posits that with comics 'the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time, and motion' (McCloud, 1993: 65).

McCloud and Rushkoff are not the only theorists who single out the gutter as a key co-creative element of the comic book medium. In *The Language of Comics* Mario Saraceni makes a similar claim to McCloud with slightly different language. Saraceni argues that readers link panels together through the inherent cohesion between the panels themselves and the readers' ability to 'recognise elements belonging to the same "semantic field" [area of meaning]' and on their 'capacity to make sense of incomplete information' through inference (Saraceni, 2003: 46). Saraceni even goes so far as to claim that comics without a true, physical gutter are not gutterless. For him, 'the gap, while not physically present, is still there conceptually' (Saraceni, 2003: 55). Whether there is a physical gutter or a conceptual one, Saraceni contends that 'readers cannot just "jump over" the gutter, but they need to pause and think of possible ways to see "inside it"' (Saraceni, 2003: 56).

The gutter is arguably one of the comic book's strongest assets when it comes to enticing readers to not only invest in the narrative but to participate in it as well. Recall that in my method chapter I overviewed the work of religious studies hermeneuticist Hans-Georg Gadamer in order to argue that interpretive experiences necessitate a meeting of horizons where the worldview of the reader meets and combines with the world presented by the text. The comic book medium's physical features, especially the gutter, allow this process to occur without a strenuous effort on the part of the reader because the very process of reading a comic book requires that the readers' worldviews combine with the text. This meeting of horizons enhances the transcendent potential

of the medium and narratives it encloses by allowing the reader to take part in the lives of the characters, whether they be gods, humans, or something in between. *Watchmen* is a comic full of gutters; the general page layout is a nine-panel grid (see Figure 21) that is modified only when the narrative calls for it and utilizes the basic form of the comic book to tell a story uniquely situated to the medium. Its use of gutters, the multiframe, speech bubbles, and ancillary material, as well as other medium-specific traits, highlights its reliance on the comic book medium to involve the reader and create a unique meaning-making experience.

Figure 21 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

In my earlier case studies I paid close attention to the impact of character identification as it relates to the transcendent potential of any narrative. The same principles that I used to emphasize the importance of character identification in film versions of superhero narratives with transcendent potential apply to comic books. The narrative aspects of character identification remain the same, but the medial tools used to achieve it differ. McCloud argues that identification is actually an essential element of any kind of comic book story telling because of the nature of cartooning in general. According to McCloud, cartoons and comics are forced to use icons, especially symbols, to represent ideas because of the medium's basic ontology as a drawn, generally unrealistic artform (McCloud, 1993: 27). He argues that cartoons act as 'a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled [...] an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm' (McCloud, 1993: 36). McCloud connects the vacuum-like effect of comics to their reliance on what he terms 'universal identification simplicity', a phenomenon that describes the way simple art allows readers to easily identify with characters because of the way it functions as a blank slate (McCloud, 1993: 37). When simply drawn characters are paired with detailed background art it allows the reader to project themselves onto the character while recognizing the world the character lives in as something familiar. McCloud singles out *Tintin* as an example of a comic that achieves this balance (McCloud, 1993: 42 – 43), but I would argue that *Watchmen* achieves it as well.

Although the world that the characters inhabit is very different from the world its readers occupy—the narrative is set in an alternate timeline where vigilante heroes were once the norm, the United States won the Vietnam war, and Richard Nixon is continuously re-elected as President—it is similar enough to be a recognizable alternative. The detailed style of *Watchmen*'s New York helps bring the cityscape alive (see Figure 22). At first glance it seems as

though the realism of the narrative's backdrop extends to the way the characters are drawn as well. Take, for instance, Dan Drieberg/Nite Owl. When Drieberg is not in his costume he looks like a very realistic middle-aged man; he is a bit overweight, a bit wrinkled, and wears spectacles. When he transforms into Nite Owl, however, he becomes a blank slate for two reasons: first, Nite Owl's mask has a simpler form than the detailed drawing of his face; second, anybody, even a fictional version of the reader, could wear his costume and be in his place (see Figures 23a and 23b). The masked nature of the superhero encourages character identification due to the universal identification simplicity phenomenon that McCloud writes about. I suggest that this phenomenon is possible across all media types but is heightened in media that rely on drawn images and do not use sound, like a comic book. A character's voice can be an identifying and unique characteristic that may hinder the effects of universal identification simplicity.

Figure 22 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 23a (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 23b (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

This can be clearly observed when Rorschach is taken as a case study. The nature of Rorschach's mask is quite literally an invitation for readers to project their own meaning onto the character. In both the comic book and the film Rorschach is an iconic character who is known

for his extremely violent behaviour. His view of justice and violence is most likely a foreign way of thinking for a large swathe of viewers. That said, *Watchmen* (both the filmic and comic book version) invites viewers to observe and contemplate different forms of morality and justice. In the filmic version, Rorschach's voice is so distinctive and disturbing that it not only makes him more memorable to fans, but it effectively makes him less of a blank slate as well. Many of the religious film reviews that I analysed in the last chapter were clearly troubled by the behaviour of Rorschach.

I argue that Rorschach's behaviour is more palatable (and therefore easier to consider and evaluate) in comic book form for two reasons: first, as Christopher Orr from *The Atlantic* points out, the violence in the comic book is less vivid and explicit (due, in part, to it being graphically depicted) than the same violent scenes in the film (see Figure 24 and Figure 25) and second, the nature of comics invites viewers to lend their voices to the characters—which not only invites projection but also the consideration of worldviews and moralities that may otherwise be revolting. Further on in this chapter I will analyse publicly available Goodreads reviews of *Watchmen* that focus on its religious content; interestingly almost all of them pay very close attention to the moral worldviews represented by each of the characters, including Rorschach, instead of just focusing on the violent spectacle of particular panels.[64] The difference in tone and focus between these reviews and the writings of seasoned critics and bloggers is telling and will be returned to near the end of this chapter.

Figure 24 (below).

[64] All of the Goodreads reviews that I analyse in this chapter are included in Appendix E.


Image removed for copyright reasons

Figure 25 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

The multi-layered nature of the comic sees even the layout, letters, and types of lines forming the panel's edge become a part of the story. It is because of this multimodal nature of the comic book that the introduction of mythical symbolism can occur with ease. Orcutt claims that the multi-modality of the comic book medium allows it to express narratives similar to religious ones because both comic book and religious narratives include similar symbolic texts and images and 'involve and evoke multiple ways of interpreting and understanding' (2010: 95). He submits that the physical form of the comic book 'can mimic virtually all modes of human perception, physical or mental' before going on to connect the multimodal nature of comic books with religion by claiming that 'religious experience is similarly multimodal' (Orcutt, 2010: 94). Orcutt supports this claim by suggesting that the comic book's shared reliance with religion on icons, symbolic images, and texts causes comic book narratives, like religious narratives, to promote identification among readers while also involving and evoking 'multiple ways of interpreting and understanding' that, in turn, cause comic book narratives to function in an 'immersive fashion' (2010: 94). The immersive nature of the comic book encourages readers to take 'an active role in crafting comics narratives by acting as co-creators of their reading

experience' that, in turn, allows comic book narratives—like religious narratives—'to solicit deep involvement on the part of their audience' (Orcutt, 2010: 97-98). Orcutt's suggestion that comic books can mimic 'virtually all modes of human perception' is admittedly grand. That said, it does seem possible that the physical form, especially the gutters, of the comic book page—when combined with superhero mythic narratives—may allow the comic book to act as a site of hierophany similar to what Bird describes in his film focused analysis (Bird, 2007).[65]

In my prior published research (Atchison, 2013) I have connected comic book narratives to religious narratives involving the transcendent on functional cognitive grounds by using the work of Luther H. Martin on anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse. According to Martin, Whitehouse outlines two modes of transmission for mythical/religious messages. The first is 'imagistic' transmission. This sort of transmission is related to ritual remembrance. It is often episodic as opposed to repetitive and is related to the formation of identity through the stimulation of biographical memory processes (Whitehouse qtd. in Martin, 2010: 480). The second type is what Whitehouse labels 'doctrinal'. Doctrinal transmissions are remembered as 'generalized scripts of schemas of knowledge' and are cognitively retained through repetition (Whitehouse qtd. in Martin, 2010: 480). Mythic stories often involve both types of transmission, the imagistic and the doctrinal.

Essentially, building on Luther H. Martin's use of Harvey Whitehorse's concepts I have previously suggested that the memory processes activated by superhero comic book narratives are similar to those activated by certain mythical or religious stories. I have claimed that comic books, and to some extent comic book narratives told in other media, are doctrinal; they have

[65] Most of this paragraph was originally published in *Religião, Mídia e Cultura* following a conference of the same title and reappears in this thesis with permission. See Atchison, 2015[a] for more information. I have also included a copy of this article in Appendix D.

their own canons and the core tenets of these canons are referred to and transmitted repeatedly (2013: 8). There are origin stories within comic book series that are accepted and are therefore canon and those which are not and are, as it were, heretical or deuterocanonical to some extent. Although *Watchmen* may not have the same long history as many of its traditional superhero comic series counterparts, the graphic novel is highly regarded and is treated in a similar way. The way Snyder's filmic version of *Watchmen* was marketed as a very faithful adaptation reflects the deep concern both fans and producers had about respecting the original, canonical text.

Comic books are imagistic; because of their ability to involve the reader as part of the story and as a co-creator of the narrative they are able to evoke an emotional response from the reader (Atchison, 2013: 8). This response can, in turn, potentially lead to the formation of 'imagistic episodic memories [. . .] stored in auto-biographic parts of memory' (Atchison, 2013: 8). Put simply, the specific comic book form—when it is combined with superhero narratives as well as the religious treatment of superhero characters and comic book series—not only creates a space suited to housing the transcendent, it potentially activates the very same cognitive processes that may be used in processing traditional religious experiences. These cognitive processes have the potential to amplify any transcendent experience that superhero comics, including *Watchmen*, may elicit.

So then, superhero comic books have formal elements that may be specifically optimized to express transcendent themes, house characters who parallel religious figures, and feature narratives and methods of transmission that activate cognitive processes similar to those activated by religious stories and experiences. Additionally, superhero comic book narratives parallel the way many religious myths treat the concept of eternality, temporality, and the finite.

Comic book narratives have the ability to approach time in a way that parallels mythic and religious stories. Namely, neither comic book narratives nor religious narratives are bound by the constraints of time, place, or even dimension (Orcutt, 2010: 98). A single page in a comic book story—like some mythic religious stories—can occupy multiple earths, multiple histories, multiple geographic locations, and multiple character narrators without the flow of the story being hampered. The ability of the narrative to simultaneously occupy a multitude of places is made real by the physical presence of the page; the reader can scan the page and simultaneously occupy the narrative space of all of these earths, histories, and geographic locations.[66]

The way comics deal with time may be closer to the human lived experience of time than is possible to convey in film. When a viewer sits down to watch a film from start to finish they encounter the movie in a pre-determined set period of time that moves in a linear fashion. Sébastien Conard and Tom Lambeens explore the lived experience of time as it relates to comic studies when they introduce 'the concept of duration as developed by Bergson and Deleuze, into the field of comic studies' (Conrad and Lambeens, 2012: 92). According to Conrad and Lambeens, Deleuze posits that time is not experienced in a predictable and standard way because 'everything in human perception is changing: the world we perceive is constantly on the move [. . .]. Moreover, the perceived him/herself is permanently in a state of transformation' (2012: 96–97). For Deleuze, this constant state of flux means that 'memory mingles with every new experience: we do not simply record, inevitably we mingle every observation with memories. Past sensations colour new ones. Each experience is thus an experience of change. Each experience of time is an experience of *lived* time or *duration*' (Conrad and Lambeens, 2012: 97).

[66] Most of this paragraph was originally published in *Religião, Mídia e Cultura* following a conference of the same title and reappears in this thesis with permission. See Atchison, 2015[a] for more information. I have also included a copy of this article in Appendix D.

Using Deleuze's concept of time as duration Conrad and Lambeens go on to argue that 'measuring imagination with clock time denies the subjective time experience that goes with the spatial changes (e.g. our eyes moving over the page). The experience of spatial transformation equals the experience of time' (Conrad and Lambeens, 2012: 97). They then go on to integrate the work of Scott McCloud with Deleuze to further cement their claim that comics have the ability to manipulate and use time in complex fashions that mimic human experiences of time in some ways. For them, McCloud successfully demonstrated how 'by means of formal and spatial devices, comics makers are able to evoke a feeling of time, rather than a precise measurement of it' (Conrad and Lambeens, 2012: 98–99). According to McCloud, readers perceive time in comics spatially but 'the problem is there's no conversion chart' (McCloud, 1993: 100) which forces the reader to rely on both the panel length and their own life experience to create a unique conversion chart for that moment (McCloud, 1993: 102). By requiring the reader to rely on their own experience in addition to what is on the page to decipher how much time has passed, comics can effectively bring the reader to fully imagine the passage of time and even, in a limited sense, take part in it. This is especially intriguing with a comic book like *Watchmen* because of the way Dr. Manhattan's perception of time is communicated in the graphic novel.

In 'Adapting *Watchmen*' Hague uses Charles Hatfield's work from *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* to provide a brief overview of how comics use the tension created by the reader's simultaneous access to individual panels and the page as a whole to create an interpretive process and meaning unique to the form (Hague, 2012: 43). Hague then uses the way *Watchmen* expresses Dr. Manhattan's perception of time as an example of how comics can manipulate the tension between the panel and the page to create a unique meaning to the form.

Recall that, in the film, Manhattan's ability to transcend the human experience of time was primarily conveyed through flashbacks and voiceovers. In the comic version of the narrative

> Moore and Gibbons use fairly basic devices such as Dr. Manhattan's narration, which runs throughout the page. At the same time, they manipulate the tension between sequence [the individual panels] and surface [the page as a whole] to give the reader the same power over the page that Manhattan has over time itself. (Hague, 2012: 43)

The comic comfortably allows frames to occupy different geographical and historical places on the same page. This allows readers to traverse those places and timeframes at their leisure and enables them to be fully present in one panel while remaining cognizant and partially present in the other panels. This experience mimics the way Dr. Manhattan perceives time. In Figure 26 we can see that Dr. Manhattan is primarily present on Mars while his former colleagues are racing to unravel Adrian Veidt's catastrophic plan; at the same time Dr. Manhattan is reliving and partially present in the memories he is recalling. In film, this kind of experience is difficult to recreate because, in Hague's words, 'the persistence of the image that is required for the effect is not possible. In his adaptation, Zack Snyder chooses to present this section of the story as a montage of shots' (Hague, 2012: 45). The ability of comic books to not only express a transcendent experience of time but also to invite the reader into a distant and very distilled form of that experience enhances the transcendent potential of stories—like *Watchmen*—that take advantage of these unique characteristics.

Figure 26 (below).

Image removed for copyright reasons

When the connections between comic books and religion that have been discussed thus far are taken into consideration along with the work of semiologists, hermeneutists, and intertextuality theorists, they may point to a culturally situated transcendental comic book style. According to Robert E. Innis, 'Peirce saw semiosis as "unlimited" or "infinite" in principle, a point which Umberto Eco has taken up and made one of the keys to his synthesis of semiotic theory' (Innis, 1985: 1). In light of Peirce's suggestion, the presence of widespread religious interpretation of narratives and characters begs the question of where these interpretations originate.

Recall that Barthes, commenting on intertextuality, claims that a 'Text'

> has no fixed true meaning, rather it has associations, [and] connections. It exists as a combination of other texts: of other words, it is "intertextual" through and through. It has effects. It only comes into existence through the work of reception that it solicits from its readers or viewers. It belongs to the play of language, or better, the play of the signifying system. (2007: 81)

Recall also that Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and utterance can be combined with Barthes' work on intertextuality. According to Bakhtin, communication through language depends on a collection of utterances (that is, complete thoughts) that can stand on their own but draw meaning from multiple locations simultaneously (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 70); an utterance, for Bakhtin, only becomes complete 'through both the author's voice and the contextual situation in which the utterance exists' (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77). Lastly, recall that for Bakhtin this process of meaning making produces what he terms 'heteroglossia,' which is a 'stratification that takes place when multiple words from multiple languages act towards a single object" (Davisson and Booth, 2010: 77). Given this, *Watchmen*—despite the way it leverages the medial qualities of the comic book to allow readers to transcend their current realities and worldviews and experience the ones conveyed in the text, including the god-like nature and experiences of Dr. Manhattan—will not automatically garner transcendent experiences from every reader. The transcendent potential of *Watchmen* depends as much on the reader and their own intertextual histories as it does on the text itself.

In the *Watchmen* film case study that precedes this chapter I analysed various critical responses to the film in light of transcendent film theories. Although some of the reviews I evaluated mentioned or reflected on religion, transcendence, and/or spirituality, many did not. The tendency for the reviewers to overlook the religious elements of the film was interesting due to the highly religious content of the movie, the divine nature of Dr. Manhattan, and the complex moral, one might even say spiritual, themes and questions the film asked. Even reviews from

websites dedicated to religion (primarily Christianity in this case) and popular culture seemed to overlook the religious content of the film in order to focus more attention on its sensational elements instead. In that case study I argued that the *Watchmen* film had tremendous transcendent potential that was ultimately undermined by the nature of the on-screen representation of the narrative and its tendency to alienate some viewers. In this chapter I have argued that some of the elements that limited the transcendent potential of Snyder's *Watchmen* are fully realized in the comic, which enhances the transcendent potential of the narrative.

In the *Watchmen* film case study I identified the film's lack of effective worldbuilding as a core reason that hindered its immersive nature and transcendent potential. In this chapter I have argued that *Watchmen* (the graphic) novel excels at worldbuilding, which allows it to invite the reader to occupy the world that it presents to them. I have also argued that the film's lack of effective worldbuilding impacted the way viewers related to the narrative and characters. When viewers were alienated by the film they were unable to connect with the characters and the conflicting moral philosophies they embodied. Interestingly, many Goodreads reviews that comment on transcendent questions of religion and spirituality also focus on both *Watchmen*'s worldbuilding capabilities and the relatability of its characters.

Goodreads user Ali Hashmi calls the decision to read *Watchmen* 'one of the best decisions I've made in life' (Hashmi, 2015: para. 1) due, in large part, to the comic's 'memorable characters' and the way it 'discusses topics of great controversy in depth' and functions as 'a satire of modern comic book characters, religion, and politics' (2015: para. 1). Goodreads user Tyler also identifies *Watchmen* as one of the best things they have ever read and praises the way *Watchmen* quickly transitions from a superhero story into an apocalyptic story that tackles 'politics, religion, science, and world peace' (Tyler, 2011: para. 1). Goodreads user

Mea calls *Watchmen* a 'masterwork' that could never be properly adapted into film because of how thorough and intriguing the story is before moving on to praise the way it 'challenges not only the formula of the superhero story, but also religion, fate, sacrifice, and morality' (Mea, 2009: para. 1). Similarly, Goodreads user Nicole was surprised and thrilled by the way 'the novel flipped [her] idea of storytelling upside down' (2009: para. 1) by upending her expectations by 'not [being] about superheroes at all, it is about regular men and women struggling with their identities. It is about war and politics. It is about psychology and religion and everything in between' (2009: para. 3). Goodreads user Thom Beckett also praises the way *Watchmen* deceptively presents itself as a simple mystery story while containing 'a commentary on politics, history, religion, morality and pretty much anything at all you care to name' (2008: para. 2). Many of the short positive reviews on Goodreads that commented on religion or God were similar to the ones I've sampled above. These short reviews point toward the comic's effectiveness in encouraging readers to reflect on deep, possibly transcendent, questions related to the nature of humanity and its relationship with morality, religion, and the divine. The longer reviews had similar themes with more details that further suggest that some readers may have realized the transcendent potential of the narrative.

Goodreads user Jim was especially moved by *Watchmen*'s protagonists, especially Rorschach:

> The chapter on Rorschach was dark! I thought it was interesting how it was all about not looking into the darkness lest you become the darkness. Rorschach was who I wanted to be when I was young and stupid and didn't realize who the real criminals were. Now I'm worried I might want to be Ozymandias. That's not better. (Jim, 2011: para. 1)

While some viewers of the filmic version of *Watchmen* were alienated by Rorschach's disturbing actions, Jim was able to relate to Rorschach and Ozymandias to explore moral philosophies and

reflect on his own moral compass before moving on to 'think a lot about what we are doing to right the wrongs in our society. The doomsday clock is ticking. Armageddon is approaching. What are we going to do with our time??' (Jim, 2011: para. 10). Jim then goes on to connect Ozymandias' utilitarian moral leanings to Christianity before ultimately concluding that morality may be a grey area but 'what can we do but try to do our best to make the most people's lives better? It's hard to be human' (2011: para. 22-23). The moral journey that *Watchmen* provoked Jim to embark on suggests that the comic can inspire readers to contemplate transcendent realities.

Goodreads user Sean Barrs appears to have gone on a similar moral journey as Jim. Barrs begins his review by stating that *Watchmen* is

> simply put, iconic. When any one mentions comics/graphic novels the first thought that enters is an image of the Watchmen. I think there is a strong reason for it. It made me question morality on a scale rarely seen in fiction. Indeed, when considering the characters it is incredibly hard to consider any of them truly good or truly bad. They are simply people who are convinced that they are right. (2015: para. 1)

Although Barrs does not admit to holding a worldview that is closely aligned with any one character, his review demonstrates that he took the time to deeply reflect on the morals and worldviews that drive Rorschach, Ozymandias, the Comedian, and Dr. Manhattan. After interrogating the morality of each character Barrs does not come to a solid conclusion regarding whether or not one character is more moral than another. Instead, he simply comments on how *Watchmen* is 'a great piece of fiction' because it subverts the superhero genre and provides a 'full questioning of the flawed, and hypocritical, nature of humankind' and, as a result, will 'never be forgotten by those that have experienced its mortifying splendour' (Barrs, 2015: para. 6).

Goodreads users Halik and Evan also reflected on and were impacted by the moral philosophies that *Watchmen* presents to readers but provide a unique perspective to that of Barrs and Jim. This is because both Halik and Evan watched the *Watchmen* film before reading the graphic novel and were not impressed or impacted by the film. Evan encountered the filmic version of *Watchmen* two years before reading the comic version and admitted that he found the film 'more than slightly ludicrous' before moving on to reveal that 'now that I've read and been bowled over by the book and its thematic ambitions and enormous insight I need to revisit the film and do a fresh comparison' (2009: para. 9). Similarly, Halik admits 'I trashed the *Watchmen* movie and didn't think I'd ever read the book. But I did, and I am glad' (2011: para. 2) before moving on to praise *Watchmen* as 'a truly complex piece of art' (2011: para. 3) that impacted his faith. For Halik, *Watchmen*'s worldview and message 'plays a lot on your spiritual beliefs. There is a lot of philosophy and metaphysics thrown on the table. To me as Muslim it was an insight into a different perspective on life' (2011: para. 10). The fact that both Halik and Evan remember being unimpressed with Snyder's *Watchmen* while being genuinely moved to moral and religious reflection by Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* attests to the effect of form on a narrative.

It is possible that Evan's and Halik's intertextual and cultural backgrounds may have changed and impacted their reaction to the same narrative years apart. That said, neither reviewer comments on the way their own worldview may have impacted the way they approached *Watchmen* while both reviewers praise the way Moore and Gibbons manipulate the comic form to tell an effective story. Evan comments that '*Watchmen* is a complex story spanning decades, told in fragmentary form, often with the past present and future [sic] co-existing, and more than one narrative woven simultaneously' (2009: para. 7) while Halik praises how 'the storytelling is a multi layered [sic] affair. I feel [Moore] has used the comic book format to maximum effect.

The pictures and words carry their own thought streams and are almost independent of each other. Yet they mix and mesh together to form a compelling and thought-provoking story' (2011: para. 7). The medial factors that Halik and Evan each point out are notable. Earlier in this chapter I have connected the aspects that Evan singles out—the fragmentary form of *Watchmen* and the way the comic book handles time—to the narrative's ability to communicate transcendence as well as the comic book's unique ability to house narratives that rely on transcendent conceptions of time. I have also argued that the multilayered nature of *Watchmen*—which Halik comments on—is integral to the narrative's worldbuilding potential as well as its transcendent potential. The fact that two reviewers who were unimpressed by the film but genuinely impacted by the graphic novel single out the same factors that I, and others, have argued enable the comic book form to express the transcendent is noteworthy.

Other Goodread users also praised the way *Watchmen* takes advantage of the comic book form. Rahul Nath claims that 'where this book [*Watchmen*] transcends all others, is in its showcasing of the power of the medium [and the way it] flaunts the strength of storytelling via the graphic novel medium' (2012: para. 6) before moving on to call *Watchmen* 'the Bible of this medium' (2012: para. 7). Nath singles out the *Tales of the Black Freighter* within *Watchmen* as well as the way each page and panel is 'stuffed with details' as defining characteristics that set it apart as a 'seminal piece of art' (2012: para. 1). Interestingly, Goodreads user Zoeb uses similar language to describe *Watchmen* and identifies similar aspects that set it apart. Zoeb begins by admitting that *Watchmen* 'became almost like a Bible for me, a sort of grand, mythological revelation that proves just what miracles can happen when all the brilliance and storytelling powers of an iconic writer and a dynamic artist combine' (2018: para. 2) before moving on to praise many of the same elements as Nath. For Zoeb, these medium specific elements combine

with ‘repeating motifs’, ‘allegorical symbols’, and the ‘Tales of the Black Freighter’ ‘story-within-story’ to ensure that ‘every character, incident and plot element, no matter how big and small, [occurs] with believable depth and pathos. We cringe at their failings, we are shocked at their sins, we share their fears and hopes and we feel for them too’ (Zoeb, 2018: para. 5). Throughout this thesis I have emphasized the importance of effective worldbuilding and relatable characters with whom readers and viewers can identify when it comes to enhancing the transcendent potential of narratives. It then follows that the ability of *Watchmen* to leverage pathos to encourage readers to connect with the story and characters is one of its greatest strengths when it comes to its transcendent potential.

Goodreads user Greg connected with both *Watchmen*’s characters and the world within the text. As such, an excerpt of his review is worth quoting at length:

> Alan Moore made superheroes into real-life people. Then he put these heroes in a paranoid world on the brink of a nuclear holocaust, a world where a symbolic clock that tracks doomsday as 12:00 is currently ticking down to the last few precious minutes. Does that world sound familiar? It should. It was Earth circa 1980’s [sic]. This reviewer recalls those times all too well, as I imagine most anyone who lived through the Cold War can. [. . .] Mr. Moore’s insight into modern society and how fragile our world is, unfortunately, rings all too true. It’s enough to keep you awake at night. (Greg, 2011: paras. 4-6)

Interestingly, it was not just the characters and Cold War narrative that drew Greg into the narrative—the artwork played a key role as well: ‘The colouring and shading make this story jump out of the book. Flashes from lightning or explosions almost made me blink. I could practically feel the dampness of a rain-slick street’ (Greg, 2011: para. 7). While Greg’s Cold War cultural and intertextual background certainly influenced how *Watchmen*’s narrative affected him, I argue that the medial qualities that I have outlined in this chapter (some of which were also mentioned by other Goodreads users) enhanced the degree to which Greg—and others—was drawn into *Watchmen’*s world.

This shows a clear contrast in how the comic book was able to realize its transcendent potential more completely and universally than the alienating spectacle of the film. The multiframe enabled *Watchmen* to bring readers along with Dr. Manhattan as he traversed time and space; speech bubbles eliminated the problem of sound and allowed the comic book to have parallel narratives occur simultaneously, which the reader could then ignore or follow; ancillary materials and the reader's ability to linger on a panel and effortlessly flip between pages to connect small details within the narrative enabled *Watchmen* to create a world with astonishing depth and realism; the nature of the superhero allowed readers to inhabit the characters as blank slates while the detailed drawings of New York grounded the narrative in a relatable reality. All of these features combined to make reading *Watchmen* an immersive, and transformative, experience for many of the Goodreads users whose reviews I analysed in this chapter.

So then, it is clear that *Watchmen*—in graphic novel form—is fully capable of eliciting transcendent experiences, providing moral guidance, and enabling transcendent reflections from its readers. Although the film version was able to elicit similar reactions, it also garnered quite a lot of negative press, reviews, and audience experiences that the more critically acclaimed graphic novel managed to avoid. In this chapter I have demonstrated that the transcendent nature of *Watchmen* was fully realized in its comic book form because it was written to take advantage of physical qualities of the comic book that just could not be effectively translated to the film version of the narrative.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this project, I set out to explore the connections between religion and superhero narratives found in film and comic books. I conducted an overview of research that centres on film and religion in order to highlight the relative lack of scholarship available on the connection between comic books and religion as well as superhero narratives and religion more generally. I used the work of Christopher Knowles and Greg Garrett, who focus on the functional parallels of superheroes and religion, to point toward the need for a deeper exploration of the relationship between superhero narratives and the transcendent.

Given the lack of superhero focused transcendental styles of film or comics, I structured my thesis around existing transcendental film theories and styles espoused by Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy. Since these frameworks and styles were designed around specific types of films, they could not be applied to superhero narratives without some modification, which led me to the first of my three research questions: can superhero narratives fulfil modified versions of traditional transcendental film frameworks? Through my case studies of *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, I concluded that modified transcendental frameworks could be applied to superhero narratives with varying levels of success.

I began my case study of *The First Avenger* by acknowledging that Captain America is not typically connected to specific religious figures. I then illustrated that while Captain America does not have glaring religious parallels or likenesses, his origin story does have aspects that connect him to Jesus Christ. I argued that this underlying connection to Jesus Christ is notable because it allows the film to fulfil the narrative and character elements of Bazin's framework for a truly religious film. Although Bazin's formal requirements cannot be applied to any superhero

narrative (and possibly any modern blockbuster film), I argued that the elements of his framework that require a film to use its characters, stories, and events to 'assert [. . .] the total transcendence of grace, which occurs at the expense of apologetics [and] Christian propaganda' (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 7) and to ensure that every religious parallel 'carries its own biographical and individual meaning [. . .] [instead of being] an imitation of its divine model' were fulfilled by Steve Rogers' heroic journey as Captain America. In short, I illustrated that the character-driven nature of the film parallels what Bazin admired about *Diary of a Country Priest* and *Heaven over the Marshes* without falling into the pitfalls of narratively insignificant overt religious spectacle (Cardullo and Bazin, 2016: 1).

I also applied a narrative and character-focused version of Schrader's transcendental style to *Captain America: The First Avenger* to demonstrate that, while the film fails to end in true stasis, it does successfully create a sense of an everyday existence permeated with dull banality and a feeling of disunity that culminates in the titular character taking decisive action. I concluded that, despite the film not fulfilling all of Schrader's stages, *The First Avenger* still carries significant transcendent potential. I then applied Deacy's framework for redemptive figures to Steve Rogers as he is portrayed in the film and argued that, despite not being a typical *noir* protagonist, Rogers' authentic humanity and the way he balances high and low forms of Christological conceptions of Christlike figures makes him an effective redemptive figure.

After establishing that *Captain America: The First Avenger* successfully carves out redemptive potential through fulfilling (likely unintentionally) modified versions of Bazin's framework for effective religious films, Schrader's transcendental style, and Deacy's framework for effective on-screen redemptive protagonists, I conducted an analysis of film reviews, tweets,

and fan-fiction to support my conclusions and highlight the importance of intertextuality in meaning-making pursuits among active audience members.

While examining film reviews from religious (primarily Christian) and secular sources I found that most reviewers praised the very same elements of *The First Avenger* that granted the film transcendent potential—namely, the character of Steve Rogers and the plot that highlights Rogers' journey. I also noted that, despite the lack of overt religiosity in the film, reviewers with a Christian background did note and praise the 'very strong Christian, moral, patriotic world view' (Movieguide, no date: para. 13) that the film presents as well as its integrity, pace, balanced tone, engaging visuals (Davidson, 2011), and Steve Rogers' likeness to both King David and Jesus (Moroney, 2011). I also noted that Christian reviewers who did not find the film entirely praiseworthy still applauded the characterization of Steve Rogers.

Captain America: The First Avenger's critical reception, especially among Christian reviewers, served as compelling evidence for how the character and narrative elements espoused by Bazin, Schrader, and Deacy are still relevant and can impact a film's transcendent potential. The tendency of Christian reviewers to find Christian parallels in the film pointed to the importance of the audience member's active interpretive role as a film consumer. To investigate whether the character of Captain America inherently carries religious significance that can be transferred to films that feature him (regardless of narrative and a lack of overt religiosity), I analysed a sample of tweets that connected Captain America to religion along with examples of fan fiction that centred on the character more generally as opposed to *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Through this analysis, I concluded—due to the impact of intertextuality—that Captain America does carry an inherent religious significance that can be transplanted to any narrative that features him. In short, a character like Captain America with a long history can

never exist apart from that history. This means that when readers encounter the text, their prior experiences inform their future interpretation of it—a phenomenon that Gadamer refers to as a blending of horizons (Green, 2005). For readers whose intertextual and cultural background combine to imbue the figure of Captain America with religious significance, this means that they can carry that religious significance over to any text featuring the character, effectively enhancing the transcendent potential of that text.

The next case study sought to examine the limits of the impact of a character's history and religious overtones on the transcendent potential of a narrative and took *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* as its example. In this chapter, I began by using the work of Knowles, Tripp, McClain, and Boyer in conversation with tweets that explicitly connect Batman and Superman to faith, morality, and divinity in order to delineate the numerous religious parallels, symbols, and themes attributed to each character and to establish the fact that both Superman and Batman have more inherent religious significance attached to them than Captain America. I moved on to outline specific religious imagery and dialogue in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* to demonstrate that it is an explicitly religious movie that epitomizes the problems that Bazin saw with said films: namely that overusing religious spectacle and symbolism makes them religiously insignificant. Following this, I applied the narrative and character elements of both Schrader's transcendental style and Bazin's religious film framework to *Batman v Superman* and determined that it fulfilled neither. The characters were too flat and inauthentic to meet Bazin's conditions and the plot too climactic and chaotic to meet Schrader's plot requirements.

In order to evaluate the extent to which these obstacles impacted the film's transcendent potential, I analysed a variety of reviews from both Christian and secular sources. Through this

analysis, I found that the very elements that prevented *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* from fulling Bazin and Schrader's framework were the same reasons many writers gave the film a negative review. Goodwyn recognized the movie's spiritual potential but lamented its general excess (both in terms of religious excess and 'over-the-top action'), which ultimately downgraded 'the film's beautiful moments and clear and present takeaways of justice, redemption, and sacrifice' (Goodwyn, no date: para. 8). Other reviewers dismissed the film's treatment of religion as lazy and irreverent (Wilkinson, 2016) while others criticized it as a project that lacked substance (Seitz, 2016). For these reviewers, the religious underpinnings and mythic overtones attached to the characters were not enough to overcome the film's shortcomings.

Other reviewers, like Pollard and Bacon, praised the way *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* treated religion and approached the film as a potential catalyst that could inspire viewers to ponder transcendent realities (Pollard, no date; Bacon, 2017). Using these reviews as evidence, I claimed that *Batman v Superman* still maintained some transcendent potential despite its pitfalls and outlined the way Snyder's gritty conceptualization of the characters aligned them with Deacy's framework, making them potentially effective on-screen protagonists. I also highlighted the importance of a viewer's intertextual background in the process of the actualization of any film's transcendent potential using Bacon's theology-laden review of the film as evidence. I ultimately concluded that while *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* may have encouraged some viewers to ponder transcendent questions and realities, its transcendent potential was limited by its overindulgent and overdeveloped treatment of religion, which placed the film in stark contrast to *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

The third case study, which analyses Zack Snyder's 2009 *Watchmen* adaptation, addressed my second research question: does a superhero narrative that subverts the very idea of superheroes and features characters not typically associated with mythic or religious figures still have transcendental potential? I began this case study by applying the work of Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler, and Pascal Boyer to each of *Watchmen*'s protagonists in order to differentiate them from their more traditional heroic counterparts. Through the work of Campbell (2008) and Vogler (1985), I concluded that *Watchmen*'s characters do not follow the typical heroic archetype that defines most superheroes and mythic figures. Using the work of Boyer (2002), I determined that none of *Watchmen*'s heroes balance the intuitive (natural elements common to human ontology) and the counterintuitive (supernatural elements beyond the typical human ontological experience). I then subjected the film to an examination based on Schrader's transcendental style and determined that it does not fulfil most of Schrader's conditions. Finally, I proceeded to apply Deacy's redemptive framework to most of the characters and found that many of them fulfil his requirements precisely. I concluded that the extent to which the film fulfilled Deacy's framework imbued it with significant transcendent potential that was simultaneously limited by the elements that prevented the film from achieving Boyer's intuitive and counterintuitive balance, and from fulfilling Schrader's framework and Campbell's heroic monomyth. I then claimed that the extent to which the transcendent potential of the film could be realized by viewers would depend on their intertextual backgrounds and on how they respond to the way the film presents its many religious images, dialogue, and themes.

To test my claim, I conducted an overview of film reviews from both secular and religious sources and found that the results were mixed. Some reviewers were alienated by the hyper-violent and hyper-sexualized spectacle of the film while others were moved to reflect on

the nature of good, evil, morality, peace, war, and humanity's relationship with itself, the divine, and the universe at large. Interestingly, some of the film reviewers—like *The Atlantic's* Christopher Orr—who found the film lacking, revealed that they were positively impacted by the graphic novel version of the narrative. While most reviewers who had a negative view of the film were either alienated by its hyper-sensualized depictions of violence and sex, uninterested in the nonsensical plot and characters (Child, 2009), or just unable to relate to the vision of the world that *Watchmen* presented, those who had a positive view of the film were engrossed by it. Based on these reviews, I concluded that *Watchmen*'s transcendent potential was further limited by the extent to which audience members were alienated by its stylistic excesses.

The fourth and final case study addresses my final research question: does the medium of the comic book have the capability to enhance the transcendent potential of a narrative when it is used in creative and innovative ways? Since Snyder's *Watchmen* is recognized as a faithful adaptation of Moore and Gibbons' comic book version of the same narrative, I chose to use the original graphic novel (1986/1987) to explore the impact of Moore and Gibbons' creative and innovative use of the medium on the transcendent potential of the narrative. Ultimately, I concluded that the comic book form (as Moore and Gibbons used it) was able to heighten the transcendent potential of *Watchmen*. I utilized the work of comic book theorists in conversation with hermeneuticists, semioticians, and intertextuality theorists to demonstrate that Moore and Gibbons were able to manipulate the comic book's formal elements to create a convincing and engrossing world and to increase the co-creative role of the reader, which consequently imbued the graphic novel with transcendent potential.

I demonstrated that the world that Moore and Gibbons created was multi-layered and had much more depth than the one presented by the film. I argued that this world engrossed readers

and avoided the alienation that prevented many viewers from engaging with the filmic version of the same narrative. I then moved on to use the work of comics theorists (like Rushkoff, Thomas, and McCloud) to demonstrate that the comic book form is both uniquely co-creative and able to express the transcendent in ways that are unavailable to filmmakers. I highlighted the effects of McCloud's Universal Identification Theory as well as features of the medium (such as the gutter, the multiframe, speech bubbles, and the reader's control over the pace of the narrative) on the comic book reading experience. I paid special attention to the way comics are able to imbue the reader with a transcendent ability to simultaneously occupy multiple times and places within the narrative and identified this as another key factor that influences both the comic book's co-creative reading experience and the way it can actualize transcendence. I connected these traits to the work of hermeneuticists (like Gadamer), semioticians (like Peirce and Eco) and intertextuality theorists (like Barthes and Bahktin) to re-establish the overarching point that connects all of the case studies: namely that narrative, character, and medial qualities can enhance the transcendent potential of a text, but this potential is just as reliant on the reader/viewer and their intertextual and cultural background as it is on the text itself. With all this in mind, I turned my attention to readers' reviews. Using these as evidence I ultimately concluded that the comic book version of *Watchmen* was able to elicit transcendent experiences, provide moral guidance, and enable transcendent reflection for many of its readers in ways that were more complete and universal than its filmic counterpart. In short, the comic book form was able to enhance the transcendent potential of the narrative.

So then, it is clear that modified versions of existing transcendental film theories can be applied to superhero films (including those with non-traditional versions of superhero characters) with varying levels of success but that Bazin's warnings against excessive religiosity for the sake

of it still stand. It is also clear that the comic book form has the capability to enhance the transcendent potential of a narrative like *Watchmen* through employing and manipulating some of the form's unique medial traits. All that said, it is evident that formal, narrative, and character elements operate alongside the intertextual and cultural histories of readers and viewers to bring the transcendent potential of a text to fruition.

These findings are significant because they demonstrate that existing frameworks are too narrow to account for the experiences that some viewers have as a result of superhero narratives, which could not fulfil existing transcendent styles and frameworks without significant modification. While my work has pointed toward the transcendent potential of superhero narratives and identified elements that can enhance or diminish this potential, I have not outlined a specific transcendent style with specific requirements, like Schrader's, that can be easily followed by filmmakers and used as a checklist by film critics. Similarly, although I have demonstrated that *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986/1987) utilizes the comic book form in a way that enhances the transcendent potential of the narrative, I have not demonstrated that more traditional uses of the comic book form would be able to accomplish the same end—on the contrary, I have situated Moore and Gibbons' work as an exceptional masterclass on the potential of the medium—and I have not delineated a specific comic book transcendental style. What I have done is develop an interdisciplinary paradigm built on existing styles and frameworks that can be used to evaluate the transcendent potential of a diverse sample-set of media.

The broad applicability of this paradigm prevents it from being overly specific in its requirements while enabling it to absorb and combine existing (and much more narrow) transcendent styles and frameworks when needed. By focusing on drawing multiple means of

evaluating transcendence on film (and comic books) together into one coherent approach, I have created an adaptable paradigm that can be used in order to study the transcendent potential (and therefore religious, spiritual, and cultural significance) of not only superhero films, but also superhero TV, blockbuster action films, and the broader world of comics. This paradigm is also flexible due to its inter-disciplinary and collaborative nature. By evaluating how films enhance and limit their transcendent potential through the work of multiple theorists, this research is well suited to be continually adapted in light of further developments in transcendental film and comic book theories and audience reactions to popular multi-media narratives. Given this, my work points toward three distinct future research needs that I hope to pursue in the future.

First, there is a need to apply my paradigm to a larger sample-set of superhero films. This was a limited study and the increased diversity in the genre that developed during the course of this research calls for a larger and similarly diverse sample-set. Future research should further examine the links between superhero films and the transcendent in light of this increased diversity, but could also include investigating the religious reception of these films outside of a Western and predominantly Christian context—a weakness that my own work displays. Second, there is a need to further explore the relationship between the comic book form and transcendence regardless of narrative type. This could look like a transcendental style of comic book that is entirely based on form, but I suspect that a theory that identifies formal elements that can be combined with character and narrative aspects across multiple genres would be a more useful approach. Third, there is a need to test my paradigm's applicability to television shows and non-superhero blockbuster films. Expanding my research into serial narratives (like television shows and comic book series) will allow me to further evaluate the effects of character identification over time and home viewing practices on how audiences react to the transcendent

potential of a text. Broadening my future research focus to films outside of the superhero genre will help me evaluate the transcendent potential of characters and narratives who do not have the inherent mythic qualities that I have argued are common to most superheroes.

Ideally, these approaches would include more direct engagement with a wider variety of viewers and readers through quantitative and qualitative analysis and would build on my own highly theoretical research in this thesis. We should remember that this kind of audience engagement involves significant challenges. On the one hand, 'the way in which an audience interacts with a film [or comic book] requires, in the final analysis, an empirical investigation into audience behaviour' while on the other hand 'as far as the *religious* reading of a film [or comic book] is concerned an empirical test is fraught with difficulties' (Deacy, 2001: 90). These difficulties include, but are not limited to, selecting a sufficiently large and diverse sample of texts and study participants, formulating study and survey questions that lead to answers that are easily categorized without using leading language, formulating study and survey questions that are easily understood while using terms with contested meanings like 'religion', 'transcendence', 'god', 'spiritual', 'faith', 'belief', etc., and navigating the fact that the activity of transcendence and, in Deacy's case, 'redemption is not actually such a straightforward and observable process' (2001: 90). Although such a pursuit would be both difficult and lengthy, I do hope to eventually move toward a more empirical study of religion and transcendence on film and in comic books in the future.

Lastly, my work points toward the benefits of and need for a more interdisciplinary approach to religion scholarship that includes engaging with fields—like fan studies and comic studies—that do not typically come into conversation with religious studies. If, as Russell McCutcheon claims, religion is not a *sui generis* category (2003: 57) it should not be studied as

one. If, as Hulsether (2005) and Hinnells (2005) claim, religion and culture are closely intertwined and often overlap as concepts then it follows that studying religion alongside popular culture should not be something exceptional but something ordinary. If, as O'Neil (2013) claims, the separation of the sacred and the profane is arbitrary and ought to be dismantled then it follows that scholarship on the sacred should engage with the profane more often. It is my hope that this thesis contributes to and will inspire more scholars to add to the growing library of interdisciplinary explorations of religion and culture.

Bibliography

Anker, R.M. (2004). *Catching light: looking for god in the movies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Asay, P. (no date[a]). Captain America: the first avenger [Online]. *Pluggedin*. Available at https://www.pluggedin.ca/movie-reviews/captainamericathefirstavenger/ [accessed 20 July 2019].

Asay, P. (no date[b]). Watchmen [Online]. *Pluggedin*. Available at https://www.pluggedin.com/movie-reviews/watchmen/ [accessed 20 March 2020].

Atchison, C. (2013). A comic book culture: comics and identity formation. *The International Journal of Communication and Linguistic Studies,* 10(2), 39-45.

Atchison, C. (2015[a]). Religion and comics: a match made in heaven. In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.

Atchison, C. (2015[b]). Religion, popular culture, and the myths of historical and political secularity. In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 227-244.

Avila, W. (2006). *Diary of a country priest*: the transcendent on film. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 10 (2). [Online] https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.ca/&httpsredir=1&article=1616&context=jrf [accessed 15 October 2016].

Bacon, T. (2019). Exploring the messianic imagery of batman v superman [Online]. *GƎEKS.* Available at https://vocal.media/geeks/exploring-the-messianic-imagery-of-batman-v-superman [accessed 20 January 2020].

Barker, M. (1989). *Comics: ideology, power and the critics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author. In R. Barthes and S. Heath (Trans.). *Image, music, text* (Trans.) S. Heath. London: Fontana Press, pp. 142-148.

Barthes, R. (1985[1977]). Rhetoric of the image. In R.E. Innis, (Ed.). *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 192–205.

Barthes, R. (2007[1971]). From work to text. In S. During, (Ed.). *The cultural studies reader*. 3rd Edition. London: Routledge, pp. 81-87

Bazin, A. (2007). *Le journal d'un curé de campagne* and the stylistics of Robert Bresson. In J. Mitchell and S. B. Plate, (Eds.). *The religion and film reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 57-59.

Bird, M. (2007[1982]). Religion in film. In J. Mitchell and S.B. Plate, (Eds.). *The religion and film reader*. New York and Oxford: Routledge, pp. 391-397.

Blizek, W., Desmarais, M. and Burke, R. (2011). Religion and film studies through the *journal of religion and film*. *Religion*, 41(3), 471-485.[67]

Boyer, P. (2002). *Religion explained*. New York: Basic Books.

Brakhage, S. (2007[1963]). Metaphors on vision. In J. Mitchell and S.B. Plate, (Eds.). *The religion and film reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 60-66.

Brooker, W. (2012). *Hunting the dark knight: twenty-first century batman*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Burke, L. (2015). *The comic book film adaptation: exploring modern Hollywood's leading genre*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Callaway, K. (2012). Hearing the watchmen [Online]. *Reel Spirituality*. Available at https://www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/reelspirituality/film/articles/whe-listens-to-the-watchmen [accessed 12 April 2020].

Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand Faces*. Novato CA: Joseph Campbell Foundation/New World Library.

Cardullo, B. and Bazin, A. (2016). Cinema and theology: the case of heaven over the marshes. *Journal of Religion and Film*, 6(2), [Online]. Available at http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol6/iss2/15 [accessed 8 June 2017].

Child, B. (2009). Week in geek special: watchmen splits the critics [Online]. *The Guardian*. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/mar/05/watchmen-critics-polarised [accessed 10 December 2019].

Collin, R. (2016). Batman v Superman: dawn of justice is the most incoherent blockbuster in years – review [Online]. *The Telegraph.* Available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/2016/04/14/batman-v-superman-dawn-of-justice-is-the-most-incoherent-blockbu/ [accessed 16 February 2019].

Collins, J. and Mayblin, B. (2011). *Introducing Derrida: a graphic guide*. London: Icon Books Ltd.

Conrad, S. and Lambeens, T. (2012). Duration in comics. *European Comic Art*, 5(2), [Online]. doi:10.3Y67/eca.20ı2.050206 [accessed 13 November 2015].

[67] Burke died in 2002, his name was added by the authors as a co-author as an act of remembrance

Davidson, E. (2011). Captain America: the first avenger [Online]. *Reel Spirituality*. Available at http://www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/reelspirituality/film/reviews/captain_america_the_first_avenger [accessed 20 July 2019].

Da Vinci, L. (no date). *The notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci complete: a public domain book.* Kindle

Davis, B. (2017[a]). *Movie comics: page to screen/screen to page*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers.

Davis, G. (2017[b]). Zack Snyder confirms fan theory about 'Batman v Superman' symbolism [Online]. *Heroic Hollywood*. Available at https://heroichollywood.com/zack-snyder-batman-v-superman-symbolism/ [accessed 20 July 2019].

Davisson, A. and Booth, P. (2010). Intertextuality, parody, and polyphony in Pepsi's® 2009 presidential inauguration campaign. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 29(1), 68-87.

DC Comics, (no date). Batman: the dark knight returns (product page) [Online]. Available at https://www.dccomics.com/graphic-novels/the-dark-knight-returns-1986/batman-the-dark-knight-returns-0 [accessed 6 August 2020]

Deacy, C. (1999). Screen Christologies: an evaluation of the role of Christ-figures in film. *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* 14(3), 325-337. [Online]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13537909908580873.

Deacy, C. (2001). *Screen Christologies*: *redemption and the medium of film*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Deacy, C. (2007). Faith in film. In J. Mitchell and S.B. Plate, (Eds.). *The religion and film reader*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 306-311.

de Saussure, F. (1985[1959]). The object of linguistics. In R.E. Innis, (Ed.). *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 28-46.

Dixon, W.W. and Graham, R. (2017). *A brief history of comic book movies*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Durkheim, E. and Swain, J.W. (Trans.) (2012[1912]). *The elementary forms of the religious life.* Gutenberg Ebook. Aailable at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/41360/41360-h/41360-h.htm#Page_23

Ebert, R. (2009). Watchmen [Online]. *RogerEbert.com*. Available at https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/watchmen-2009 [accessed 20 July 2019].

Ebert, R. (2011). Captain America: the first avenger [Online]. *RogerEbert.com*. Available at https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/captain-america-the-first-avenger-2011 [accessed 20 July 2019].

Ebert, R. (2013). How I am a Roman Catholic. *RogerEbert.com*. Available at https://www.rogerebert.com/roger-ebert/how-i-am-a-roman-catholic [accessed 7 August 2019].

Eco, U. and Chilton, N. (Trans.) (1972). The myth of Superman: the amazing adventures of Superman review. *Diacritics*, (2)1, 14-22.

Eco, U. (1985[1979]). The semantics of metaphor. In R.E. Innis, (Ed.). *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 250-271.

Eco, U. (2004). The myth of superman. In J. Heer and K. Worcester, (Eds). *Arguing comics: literary masters on a popular medium*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 146-164.

Eliade, M. (1968). *Myth and reality*. New York: Harper and Row.

Eliade, M. and W. R. Trask (Trans.) (1987). *The sacred and profane: the nature of religion*. Orlando, Austin, New York, San Diego, Toronto, London: Harcourt Books Inc.

Fahmy, S., Bock, A., and Wanta, W. (2014). *Visual communication theory and research: a mass communication perspective*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Fingeroth, D. (2008). *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, comics, and the creation of the superhero*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic

Fiske, J. (2010). *Television culture*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

Fiske, J. and Hartley, J. (2003). *Reading television*. New York and London: Routledge.

Fontana, D. (2003). *Psychology, religion, and spirituality*. Leicester: BPS Blackwell.

Forbes, B.D. (1997). Batman crucified: religion and modern comic book superheroes. *Media Development*, 4, 10-12.

Foster, S. (2018). Watchmen review: the superheroes we need right now [Online]. *SBS Movies*. Available at https://www.sbs.com.au/movies/review/watchmen-review-superheroes-we-need-right-now [accessed 20 December 2019].

Foucault, M. (1977). What is an author? In D.F. Bouchard, (Ed. and Trans.), and S. Simon (Trans.). *Language, counter-memory, practice*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 113-138.

Fredriksen, P. (2006). Preface. In P. Fredriksen, (Ed.). *On the passion of the Christ: exploring the issues raised by the controversial movie*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. xi-xxii.

Gamzou, A. and Koltun-Fromm, K. (2018). *Comics and sacred texts: reimagining religion & graphic narratives*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Garrett, G. (2008). *Holy superheroes! Revised and expanded edition: exploring the sacred in comics, graphic novels, and film*. Westminster: John Knox Press.

Gibson, C. (2017). Disney film 'Coco' not good for Christians, Focus on the Family warns parents [Online]. *The Christian Post*. Available at: https://www.christianpost.com/news/disney-film-coco-not-good-for-christians-focus-on-the-family-warns-parents.html [accessed 10 July 2020].

Goldberg, M. (2016). Zack Snyder gives his thoughts on 'Watchmen': director's cut vs. ultimate cut [Online]. *Collider*. Available at https://collider.com/watchmen-directors-cut-ultimate-version-zack-snyder/#images [accessed 26 January 2019].

Goodreads Users (no date). Watchmen (review page) [Online]. *Goodreads*. Available at: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/472331.Watchmen [accessed 13 June 2020].

Goodwyn, H. (no date). Batman v Superman: dawn of justice: movie review [Online]. *CBN.com*. Available at https://www1.cbn.com/movies/superman-and-jesus-supermans-origin-and-parallels-jesus [accessed 25 January 2019].

Green, G. (2005). Hermeneutics. In J.R. Hinnells, (Ed.). *The Routledge companion to the study of religion*. London: Routledge, pp. 392-406.

Groensteen, T., B. Beaty (Trans.), and N. Nguyen (Trans.) (2007[1999]). *The system of comics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Hackett, C. and McClendon, D. (2017). Christians remain world's largest religious group, but they are declining in Europe [Online]. *Pew Research Center*. Available at https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/ [accessed 29 July 2020].

Hague, I. (2012). Adapting *Watchmen*. In S. Allen and L. Hubner, (Eds.). *Framing film: cinema and the visual art*. Bristol: Intellect, pp. 37-55.

Hague, I. (2014). *Comics and the senses: a multidisciplinary approach to comics and graphic novels*. New York: Routledge

Hall, S. (2001). Encoding and decoding. In S. During, (Ed.). *The cultural studies reader*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 507-517.

Hatfield, C. (2009). *Alternative comics: an emerging literature.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Heer, J. and Worcester, K. (2009). *A comic studies reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Hilsabeck, B. (2016). The 'is' in *what is cinema?*: on André Bazin and Stanley Cavell. *Cinema Journal*, 55(2), 25-42.

Himma, K.E. (no date). Design arguments for the existence of God [Online]. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer Reviewed Academic Resource*. Available at https://iep.utm.edu/design/#SH1c [accessed 19 December 2020].

Hinnells, J. (2005). Why study religion. In J. Hinnells, (Ed.). *The Routledge companion to the study of religion.* London and New York: Routledge, pp. 5-20.

Hsu, H. (2017). Stuart Hall and the rise of cultural studies [Online]. *The New Yorker*. Available at https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/stuart-hall-and-the-rise-of-cultural-studies [accessed 15 May 2020].

Huckabee, T. (2019). American hustle: a purer patriotism from the C*aptain America* trilogy [Online]. *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, 68. Available at https://www.brightwalldarkroom.com/2019/02/15/captain-america-trilogy/ [accessed 15 May 2020].

Hulsether, M. (2005). Religion and culture. In J. Hinnells, (Ed.). *Routledge companion to the study of religion*. New York: Routledge, pp. 489-508.

Hume, D. and Gaskin, J. (2008). *Principal writings on religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Innis, R.E. (1985). *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University.

Iyer, P. (2019). So you think you have an original plot. Think again [Online]. *The Blood-Red Pencil*. Available at https://bloodredpencil.blogspot.com/2019/03/so-you-think-you-have-original-plot.html [accessed 4 January 2020].

Jakobson, R. (1985[1960]). Closing statement: linguistics and poetics. In R.E. Innis, (Ed.). *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 147-175.

Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual poachers: television fans and participatory culture*. London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall.

Jenkins, H. (2006). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2010). Why Fiske still matters. In J. Fiske, *Television culture*. 2nd Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. and Hills, M. (2006). Excerpts from 'Matt Hills interviews Henry Jenkins'. In J. Jenkins, *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: exploring participatory culture*. New York and London: New York University Press, pp. 9-36.

Jenson, J. (2001[1992]). Fandom as pathology: the consequences of characterization. In L. A. Lewis, (Ed.). *The adoring audience: fan culture and popular media*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 9-29.

Judy, L. (2014). Captain America: the first avenger [Online]. *Cross Culture*. Available at http://thecrossculture.org/2014/05/27/captain-america-the-first-avenger/ [accessed 20 July 2019].

Jump, H.A. (2007[1910]). The religious possibilities of the motion picture. In J. Mitchell and S. B. Plate, (Eds.) *The religion and film reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 14-24.

Kaushik, P. (2012). Christopher Nolan, an auteur in contemporary cinema [Online]? *Huffington Post*. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/preetam-kaushik/christopher-nolan-an-aute_b_1709297.html [accessed 20 July 2019].

Knowles, C. (2007). *Our gods wear spandex: the secret history of comic book heroes*. San Francisco: Red Wheel/Weiser publisher.

Kripal, J. (2011). *Mutants & mystics: science fiction, superhero comics, and the paranormal*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Laycock, J. (2010). Myth sells: Mattel's commission of the masters of the universe bible. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, 22(2). [Online]. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.22.2.004.

Lefèvre, P. (1999). Recovering sensuality in comic theory. *International Journal of Comic Art*, 1(1), 140-149.

Leishman, R. (2018). Why *Captain America: the first avenger* is my favorite marvel film [Online]. *The Mary Sue*. Available at https://www.themarysue.com/captain-america-favorite-marvel-movie/ [accessed 20 July 2019].

Lewis, A. (2010). Superman graveside: superhero salvation beyond Jesus. In A. Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, (Eds.). *Graven images: religion in comic books & graphic novels*. New York: Continuum, pp.166-187.

Lewis, A. and Hoff Kraemer, C, (Eds.), (2010). *Graven images: religion in comic books & graphic novels*. New York: Continuum.

Lyden, J. (2003). *Film as religion: myths, morals, and rituals*. New York: New York University Press.

Lyden, J. (2007[2003]). Film as religion: myths, morals, and rituals. In J. Mitchell and S. B. Plate, (Eds.). *Religion and film reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 416-426.

Lyden, J. (2016[2015]). Watching movies, seeing transcendence: films as a site of interfaith encounter. *The Journal of Religion & Film*, 20(3). [Online]. Available at https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.ca/&httpsredir=1&article=1611&context=jrf. [accessed 15 July 2020].

Lyden, J. (2019). *Film as religion: myths, morals, and rituals*. 2nd Edition. New York: New York University Press.

Mark, J.J. (2013). Alexander the Great [Online]. *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Available at https://www.ancient.eu/Alexander_the_Great/ [accessed 18 December 2020].

Mark, J.J. (2016). Ancient Egyptian government [Online]. *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Available at https://www.ancient.eu/Egyptian_Government/ [accessed 18 December 2020].

Marsh, C. (2009). Audience reception. In J. Lyden, (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to religion and film*. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 255-274.

Marsh, C. (2005[2004]). *Cinema & sentiment: film's challenge to theology*. Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press.

Martin, L. H. (2005). Religion and cognition. In J. Hinnells, (Ed.). *The Routledge companion to the study of religion.* London and New York: Routledge.

McCloud, S. (1993). *Understanding comics*. Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press.

McCutcheon, R. (2003). *Manufacturing religion: the discourse on sui generis religion and the politics of nostalgia.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGee, A. (2012). Haitian vodou and voodoo: imagined religion and popular culture. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 41(2), 231-256. SAGE [Online] DOI: 10.1177/0008429812441311 [accessed 23 January 2013].

McLain, K. (2011). The place of comics in the modern Hindu imagination. *Religion Compass*, 5(10), 598-608. [Online] DOI: 10.1111/j.1749-8171.2011.00304.x [accessed 24 January 2013].

Mitchell, J. and Plate, S. B. (2007[a]). General introduction. In J. Mitchell and S. B. Plate, (Eds.). *Religion and film reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-6.

Mitchell, J. and Plate, S. B. (2007[b]). Introduction: the birth of film theory. In J. Mitchell and S. B. Plate, (Eds.). *Religion and film reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 45-48.

Mohapatra, S. (2010). Echoes of eternity: Hindu reincarnation motifs in superhero comic books. In A. Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, (Eds.). *Graven images: religion in comic books & graphic novels*. New York: Continuum, pp. 121-133.

Moore, A., Gibbons, D., and Wein, L. *Watchmen* [Online]. New York: DC Comics. Available at: https://www.scribd.com/doc/13749342/Watchmen-comic-full [accessed 15 July 2020].

Moroney, J.A., (2011). Captain America: the first avenger review [Online]. *Fervr.* Available at https://fervr.net/entertainment/captain-america-the-first-avenger-review [accessed 20 July 2019].

Morrison, G. (2012). *Supergods: our world in the age of the superhero*. London: Vintage.

Morrison, G. (2012). *Supergods: what masked vigilantes, miraculous mutants, and a sun god from Smallville can teach us about being human*. New York: Spiegel and Grau.

Morton, D. (2017[2016]). *Panel to the screen: style, American film, and comic books during the blockbuster era.* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Movieguide (no date). *Captain America: the first avenger* 'a hero for everyone' [Online]. Available at: https://www.movieguide.org/reviews/captain-america-the-first-avenger.html [accessed 18 July 2020].

Mullen, S. (2016). Q: is Zack Snyder's superman a Christ figure? [Online]. *ScreenPrism.com*. Available at http://screenprism.com/insights/article/are-man-of-steel-and-batman-v-superman-religious [accessed 20 August 2019].

Musée du Louvre (no date). Exhibition: the Louvre invites the comics [Online]. Available at https://www.louvre.fr/en/expositions/louvre-invites-comics [accessed 6 August 2020].

Nayar, S. (2010). Reconfiguring the 'genuinely' religious film: the oral contours of the overabundant epic. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 78(1), 100-128.

O'Neil, K.L. (2013). Beyond broken: affective spaces and the study of American religion. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 81(4), 1093-1116.

Orcutt, D. (2010). Comics and religion: theoretical connections. In A. Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, (Eds.). *Graven images: religion in comic books & graphic novels*. New York: Continuum, pp. 93-106.

Orr, C. (2009). The movie review, "watchmen" [Online]. *The Atlantic*. Available at https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2009/03/the-movie-review-watchmen/69071/ [accessed 20 December 2019].

Owlmoose, (2014). Faith [Online]. *Archive of Our Own*. Available at https://archiveofourown.org/works/1583834 [accessed 20 July 2019].

Paley, W. (1867). *Natural theology: or evidences of existence and attributes of the deity collected from the appearances of nature*. Boston: Gould and Lincoln.

Parker, J.R. (2009). We finally get to watch [Online]. *Pop Theology: where religion meets pop culture*. Available at https://www.patheos.com/blogs/poptheology/2009/03/the-watchmen/ [accessed 20 December 2019].

Peirce, C.S. (1985[1931]). Logic as semiotic: the theory of signs. In R.E. Innis, (Ed.). *Semiotics: an introductory anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 4-23.

Perretta, D. (2013). Film analysis: Zack Snyder's man of steel (2013) [Online]. *Black is White*. Available at http://blackiswhiteblog.wordpress.com/2013/07/10/film-analysis-zack-snyders-man-of-steel-2013/ [accessed 11 January 2013].

Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. (2011). *Global Christianity: A report on the size and distribution of the world's Christian population.* Washington: Pew Research Center.

Piper, J. (2007). The fall of Satan and the victory of Christ [Online]. *desiringGod.org.* Available at https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-fall-of-satan-and-the-victory-of-christ [accessed 20 December 2020].

Pollard, N. (no date). Batman v Superman: philosophy of religion [Online]. *EthosMedia.org*. Available at https://ethosmedia.org/2016/05/30/batman-v-superman-and-the-philosophy-of-religion/ [accessed 16 Jan 2019].

Ricouer, P. (2007[a][1986]). Phenomenology and hermeneutics. In J.B. Thompson, (Trans.). *From text to action: essays in hermeneutics*, II. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 25-52.

Ricouer, P. (2007[b][1986]). The hermeneutical function of distanciation. In J.B. Thompson, (Trans.). *From text to action: essays in hermeneutics*, II. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 75-88.

Rosenberg, A. (2016). The cure for 'Batman v Superman: dawn of justice'? More religion [Online]. *The Washington Post*. Available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2016/03/31/the-cure-for-batman-v-superman-dawn-of-justice-more-religion/ [accessed 16 Jan 2019].

Royal, D. (2012). A comics studies reader (review). *Studies In American Humor*, 3(25), 203-206.

Rushkoff, D. (2010). Foreword: looking for God in the gutter. In A. Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, (Eds.). *Graven images: religion in comic books & graphic novels*. New York: Continuum, pp. ix-xii.

Sandlin, A. (2018). Jesus Christ's finished work finishes off Satan and sin [Online]. *Ezra Institute*. Available at https://www.ezrainstitute.ca/resource-library/articles/jesus-christs-finished-work-finishes-off-satan-and-sin/ [accessed 20 December 2020].

Saraceni, M. (2003). *The language of comics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Schrader, P. (1972). *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Schrader, P. (1988). *Transcendental style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Boston: Da Capo Press.

Schrader, P. (2017). Paul Schrader on revisiting transcendental style in film [Online]. *TIFF 2017.* Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m4F8I8OVmUU&feature=youtu.be [accessed at 18 July 2020].

Schrader, P. (2018). *Transcendental style in film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Seitz, M. Z. (2016). Batman v Superman: dawn of justice [Online]. *RogerEbert.com*. Available at https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/batman-v-superman-dawn-of-justice-2016 [accessed 18 Jan 2019].

Sim, S. And Van Loon, B. (2009). *Introducing critical theory: a graphic guide*. London: Icon Books Ltd.

Smith, A. (2009). Judaism and Jewishness in film. In W. Blizek, (Ed.). *The continuum companion to religion and film*. London: Continuum, pp.167-176.

Thody, P. and Piero. (2011). *Introducing Barthes: a graphic guide.* London: Icon Books Ltd.

Thomas, E. (2010). Invisible art, invisible planes, invisible people. In F.L. Aldama, (Ed.). *Multicultural comics: from zap to blue beetle*. Austin: University of Texas, pp.157-172.

Todorov, T. (1975). *The fantastic: a structural approach to a literary genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University.

Tripp, A. (2010). Killing the graven god: visual representations of the divine in comics. In A. Lewis and C. Hoff Kraemer, (Eds.). *Graven images: religion in comic books & graphic novels*. New York: Continuum, pp.107-120.

Tyler, J. (no date). Captain America: the first avenger [Online]. *CinemaBlend*. Available at https://www.cinemablend.com/reviews/Captain-America-First-Avenger-5360.html [accessed 20 July 2019].

Vogler, C. (1985). A practical guide to Joseph Campbell's the hero with a thousand faces' [Online]. Available at https://www.scribd.com/doc/182012501/A-Practical-Guide-to-the-Hero-With-a-Thousand-Faces [accessed 18 July 2020].

Watkins, G. (2009). Religion, film and film theory. In W. Blizek, (Ed.). *The continuum companion to religion and film*. London: Continuum, pp. 80-88.

Wertham, F. (1954). *Seduction of the innocent*. New York: Rinehart.

Wilkinson, A. (2016). Holy week, batman! [Online]. *Christianity Today*. Available at https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/march-web-only/holy-week-batman.html [accessed 20 November 2019].

WinterMagnets, (2014). Winter discoveries. *Archive of Our Own*. Available at https://archiveofourown.org/works/1499963/chapters/3168104 [accessed 20 July 2019].

Filmography

300 (Zack Snyder, 2006)

Batman (Tim Burton, 1989)

Batman Begins (Christopher Nolan, 2005)

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice (Zack Snyder, 2016)

The Bible: In the Beginning (John Huston, 1966)

Black Panther (Ryan Coogler, 2018)

Captain America: First Avenger (Joe Johnston, 2011)

Captain Marvel (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019)

The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2008)

The Dark Knight Rises (Christopher Nolan, 2012)

Diary of a Country Priest (Robert Bresson, 1951)

First Reformed (Paul Schrader, 2017)

Green Lantern (Martin Campbell, 2011)

Heaven over the Marshes (Augusto Genina, 1949)

Inception (Christopher Nolan, 2010)

The Incredible Hulk (Louis Leterrier, 2008)

Iron Man (Jon Favreau, 2008)

Iron Man 2 (Jon Favreau, 2010)

Justice League (Joss Whedon and Zack Snyder, 2017)

The Last Temptation of Christ (Martin Scorsese, 1988)

Man of Steel (Zack Snyder, 2013)

Marvel's The Avengers (Joss Whedon, 2012)

Memento (Christopher Nolan, 2000)

Nostalghia (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983)

The Passion of the Christ (Mel Gibson, 2004)

The Prestige (Christopher Nolan, 2006)

Raging Bull (Martin Scorsese, 1980)

The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, 1994)

Sin City (Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez 2005)

Star Wars: A New Hope (George Lucas, 1977)

Sucker Punch (Zack Snyder, 2011)

Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976)

The Ten Commandments (Cecil B. Demille, 1956)

Thor (Kenneth Branagh, 2011)

Titanic (James Cameron, 1997)

Watchmen (Zack Snyder, 2009)

Wonder Woman (Patty Jenkins, 2017)

Appendix A:


Mike Landry
@mikeisthird
My latest for @grandinmedia - "Stay close to Jesus, and learn the truth" (with a little Captain America: Civil War for good measure):grandinmedia.ca/task-simple-st…
7 2:22 PM - Feb 8, 2019
Our task is simple: stay close to Jesus, and …
If you've ever seen the movie Captain America: Civil War, you might recall that Captain...
grandinmedia.ca
See Mike Landry's other Tweets


Kiya "Steamboat" Nicoll @kiya_nicoll · Feb 9, 2019
Replying to @asha_lh
(Followed @elektrotal here.)
When Oldest asked me what a god was, I told her, "A god is a story that's alive."
Kiya "Steamboat" Nicoll
@kiya_nicoll
Now I have time to come back to this, briefly, I note that we had several subsequent conversations about what it meant for a story to be alive, what stories *mean* anyway, and whether under that definition Captain America was a god.
10:42 PM - Feb 9, 2019
See Kiya "Steamboat" Nicoll's other Tweets

Image from tweet removed for copyright reasons


Pittsburgh Atheist
@PittAtheist
Captain America said:
"It's tempting to want to live in the past. It's familiar. It's comfortable. But it's where fossils come from."
Captain America:Man Out of Time
-Just as real as yours.
Marco Rubio @marcorubio
The LORD God said:
“It is not good for the man to be alone.
I will make a suitable partner for him.”
Genesis 2:18
22 9:10 AM - Feb 15, 2019
See Pittsburgh Atheist's other Tweets


Ronnie Shirley
@LizardLickTowin
#DirtWord #LickLife
One of my favorite lines in a movie “they’re almost like Gods”. “Ma’am, there’s only one God, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.”
– Captain
America
13 9:29 PM - Feb 15, 2019
See Ronnie Shirley's other Tweets


Darci McIltrot
@DarciMciltrot
Replying to @Bachlong007 and 3 others
Good news is we have a true King and his name is Jesus! And according to Italy, we have a super hero in @realDonaldTrump They refer to him as Captain America!
2 2:08 PM - Jan 14, 2019
See Darci McIltrot's other Tweets

ChiMom @chi3mom · Feb 10, 2019

Replying to @KimHoll77281338 and 2 others

So imagine if Thanos forced the universe to worship Him, it wouldn't be true honoring worship, God gives us the choice....dictators force people to bow and comply. God wants you to come to Him.

Kim Holloway

@KimHoll77281338

Fuck that. Thanos is also a psychopath - but I DO love the comparison coz that means that atheists are basically Captain America fighting back against the immoral tyranny of Thanos/God.

1:07 AM - Feb 10, 2019

See Kim Holloway's other Tweets

Eyes On The Issues
@OnIssues

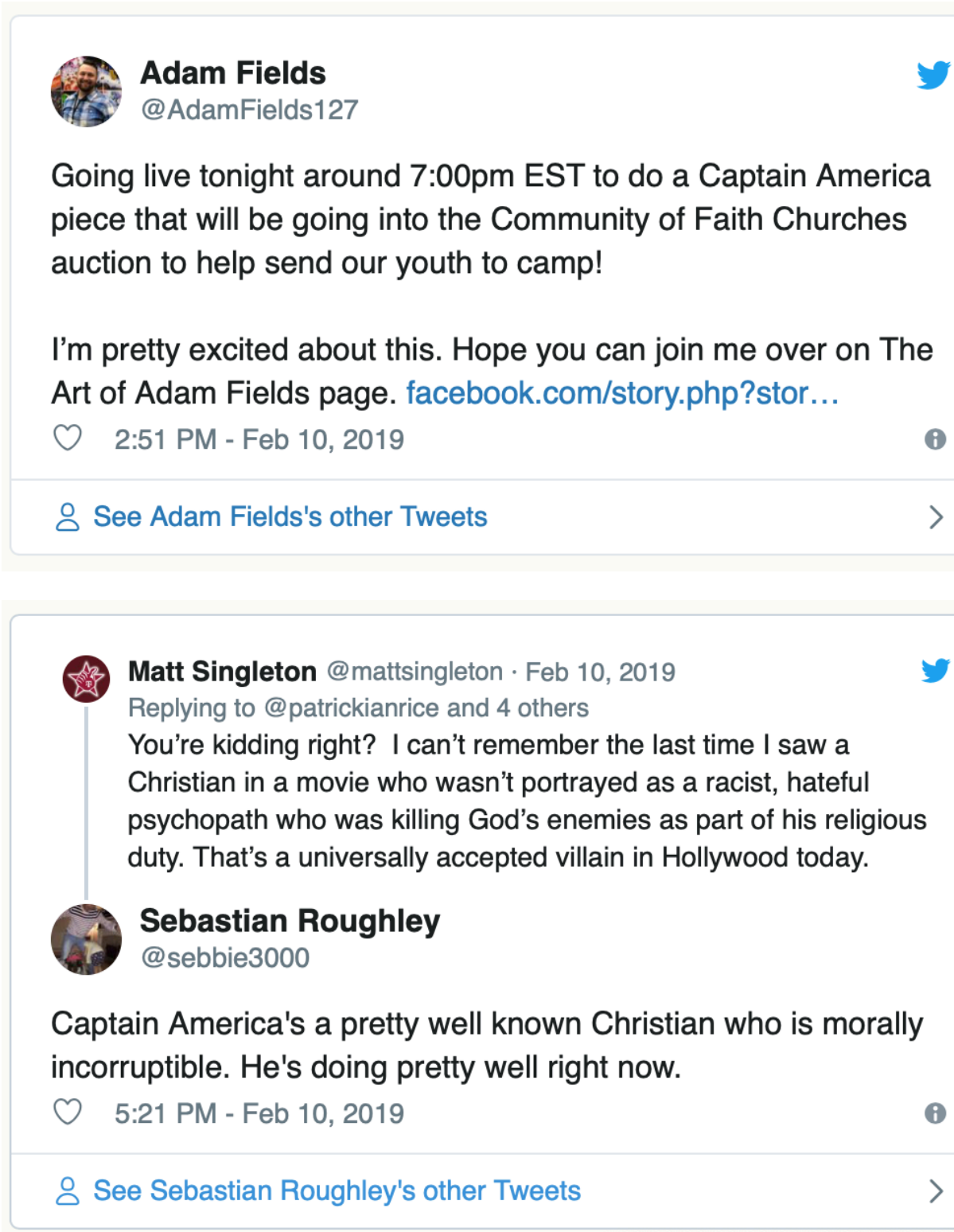
Chris Pratt Should take over as Captain America and rid us of that fraud Chris Evans.
Chris Pratt is a much better example to the youth and fits the part physically better. fxn.ws/2SnrZO7 #FoxNews

2:33 AM - Feb 10, 2019

Chris Pratt credits faith with helping him avoid 'lion's den' of f...

Chris Pratt opened up about his recent biblical fast and how his Christian faith continues to help him navigate the “lion’s den” that is

foxnews.com



Adam Fields
@AdamFields127

Going live tonight around 7:00pm EST to do a Captain America piece that will be going into the Community of Faith Churches auction to help send our youth to camp!

I'm pretty excited about this. Hope you can join me over on The Art of Adam Fields page. facebook.com/story.php?stor…

2:51 PM - Feb 10, 2019

See Adam Fields's other Tweets

Matt Singleton @mattsingleton · Feb 10, 2019
Replying to @patrickianrice and 4 others
You're kidding right? I can't remember the last time I saw a Christian in a movie who wasn't portrayed as a racist, hateful psychopath who was killing God's enemies as part of his religious duty. That's a universally accepted villain in Hollywood today.

Sebastian Roughley
@sebbie3000

Captain America's a pretty well known Christian who is morally incorruptible. He's doing pretty well right now.

5:21 PM - Feb 10, 2019

See Sebastian Roughley's other Tweets

Matt Singleton @mattsingleton · Feb 10, 2019

Replying to @sebbie3000 and 5 others

Can you point out one quote or reference in any Captain America or Avengers movie that talks about God, or Captain America being Christian?

Sebastian Roughley
@sebbie3000

Black Widow: These guys come from legend. They're basically gods.

Captain America: There's only one God, ma'am, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that.

I think we can pretty sure, as a white American born in the 1920s, who he was talking about there.

♡ 1 9:44 PM - Feb 10, 2019

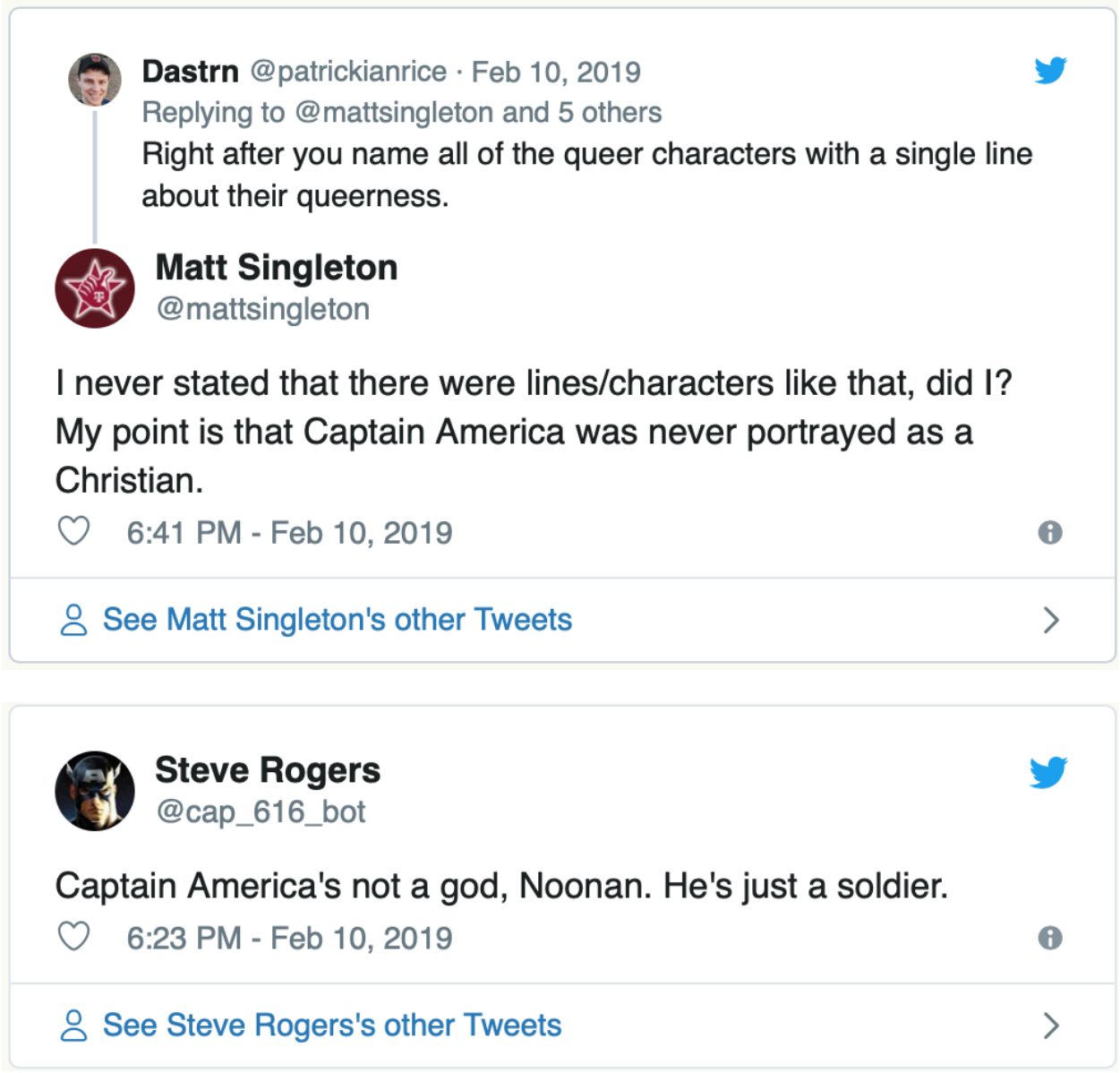
See Sebastian Roughley's other Tweets

Jacob
@JacobOrr21

If Marvel can make Captain America a dope character then for sure somebody can put Jesus on there. This man really was the greatest person in history

♡ 2 7:01 PM - Feb 10, 2019

See Jacob's other Tweets



Dastrn @patrickianrice · Feb 10, 2019
Replying to @mattsingleton and 5 others
Right after you name all of the queer characters with a single line about their queerness.

Matt Singleton
@mattsingleton

I never stated that there were lines/characters like that, did I? My point is that Captain America was never portrayed as a Christian.

6:41 PM - Feb 10, 2019

See Matt Singleton's other Tweets

Steve Rogers
@cap_616_bot

Captain America's not a god, Noonan. He's just a soldier.

6:23 PM - Feb 10, 2019

See Steve Rogers's other Tweets


Sebastian Roughley @sebbie3000 · Feb 10, 2019
Replying to @mattsingleton and 5 others
Captain America's a pretty well known Christian who is morally incorruptible. He's doing pretty well right now.
Matt Singleton
@mattsingleton
Can you point out one quote or reference in any Captain America or Avengers movie that talks about God, or Captain America being Christian?
1 5:36 PM - Feb 10, 2019
See Matt Singleton's other Tweets

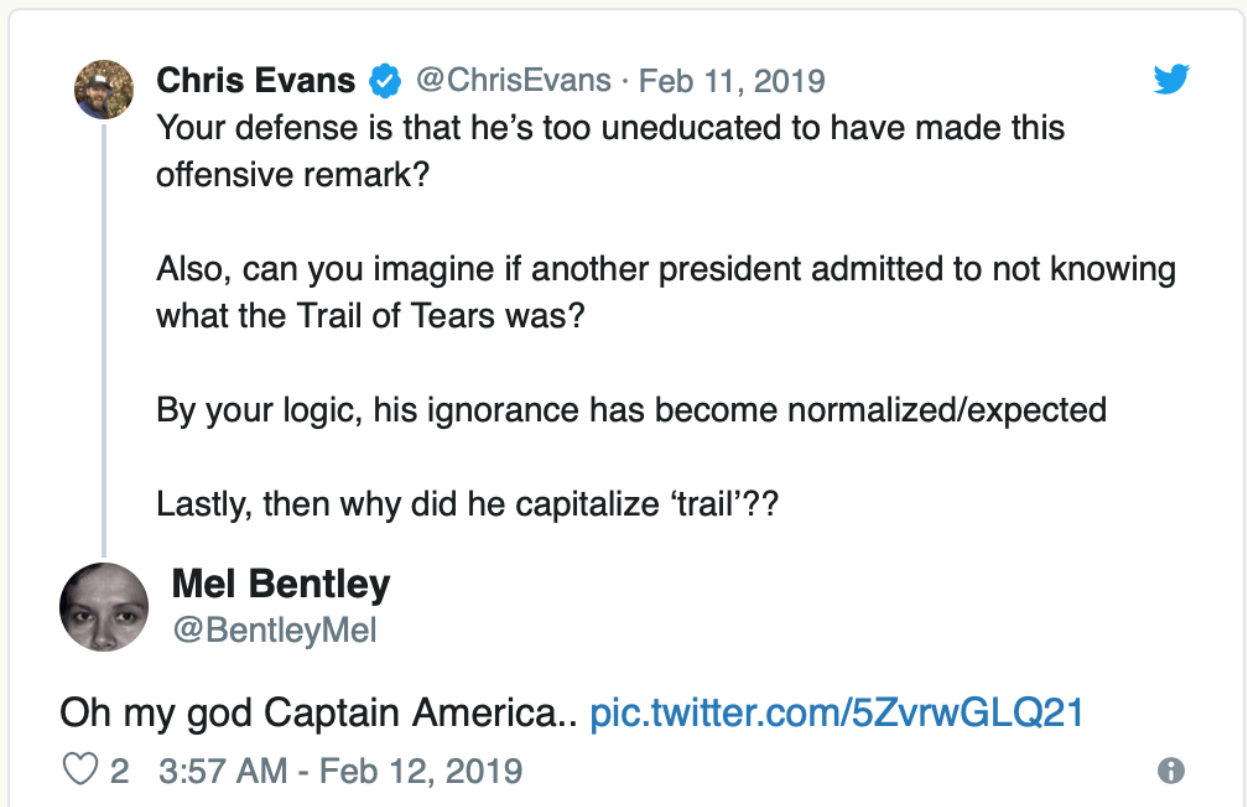


Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons


samantha
@samnohe__
THE FAITH OF THIS NATION IS IN THE HANDS OF CAPTAIN AMERICA NOW
Chris Evans @ChrisEvans
Either you STILL don't understand that weather is not climate despite literally everyone explaining it to you every time you tweet this ignorance, or you just don't care, and you're deliberately misleading your base.
Which is it? twitter.com/realDonaldTrum…
9:30 AM - Feb 12, 2019
See samantha's other Tweets

Hills Kidz
@HillsKidz

Or Big Hero series kicked off with THE Captain America (and a small imposter, pictured). We're all about seeing ourselves in God's image this month. New Memory Verse to practice at home:
"God is our refuge and strength. An ever-present help in trouble."
Psalm 46:1

8:00 AM - Feb 13, 2019

See Hills Kidz's other Tweets


a @avocadoux · 8 Oct 2017
superman is real and he is Catholic
1
5
1
a
@avocadoux
Follow
unlike captain america who is a zealous christian
9:36 PM - 8 Oct 2017
4 Retweets 1 Like
1
4
1

Appendix B:


Pittsburgh Atheist
@PittAtheist
Captain America said:
"It's tempting to want to live in the past. It's familiar. It's comfortable. But it's where fossils come from."
Captain America:Man Out of Time
-Just as real as yours.
Marco Rubio @marcorubio
The LORD God said:
“It is not good for the man to be alone.
I will make a suitable partner for him.”
Genesis 2:18
22 9:10 AM - Feb 15, 2019
See Pittsburgh Atheist's other Tweets

Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

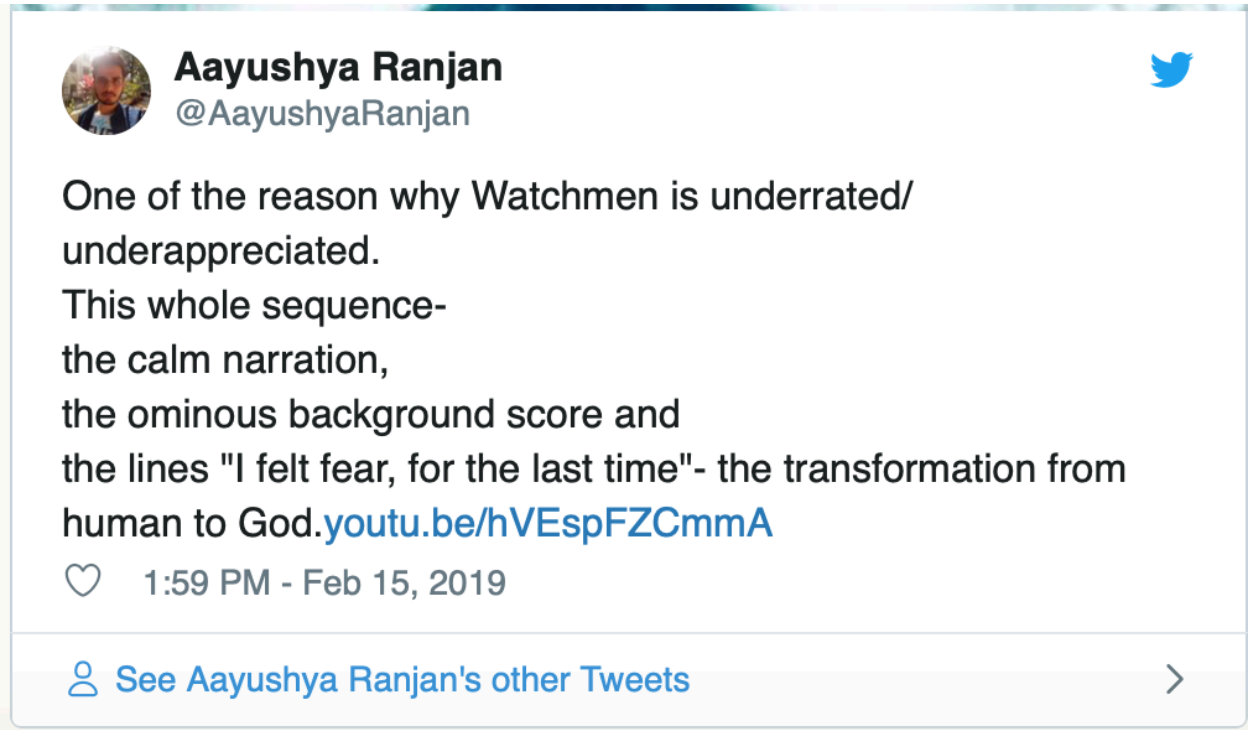
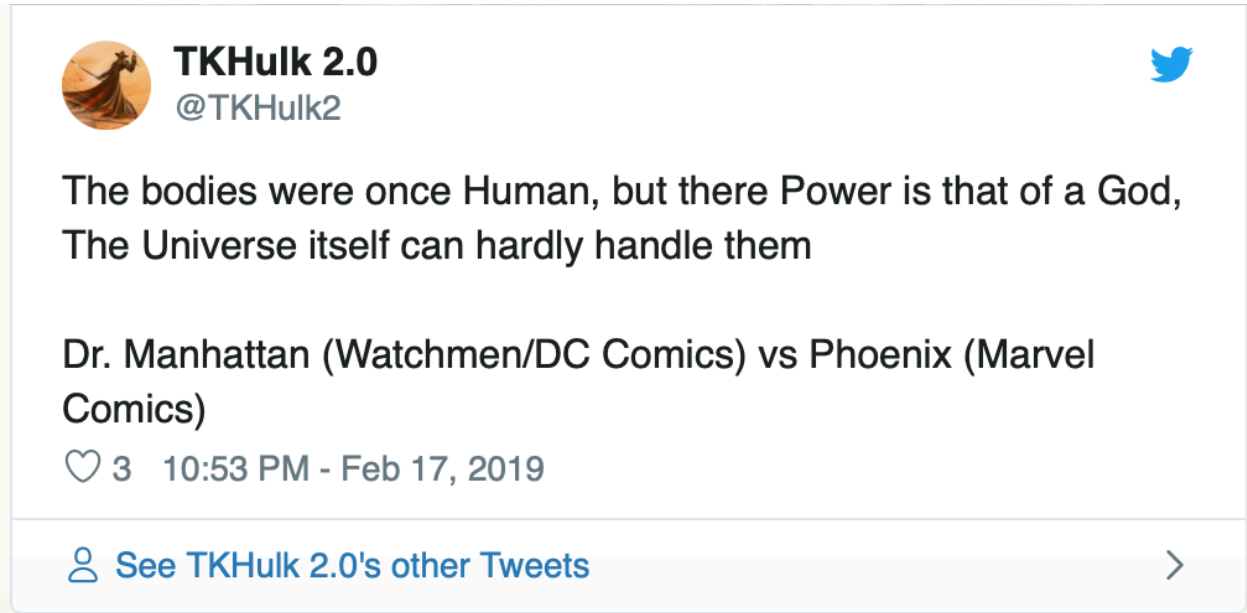


Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons




Darci McIltrot
@DarciMciltrot
Replying to @Bachlong007 and 3 others
Good news is we have a true King and his name is Jesus! And according to Italy, we have a super hero in @realDonaldTrump They refer to him as Captain America!
2 2:08 PM - Jan 14, 2019
See Darci McIltrot's other Tweets


Jacob
@JacobOrr21
If Marvel can make Captain America a dope character then for sure somebody can put Jesus on there. This man really was the greatest person in history
2 7:01 PM - Feb 10, 2019
See Jacob's other Tweets

a @avocadoux · 8 Oct 2017
superman is real and he is Catholic

1 5 1

a
@avocadoux

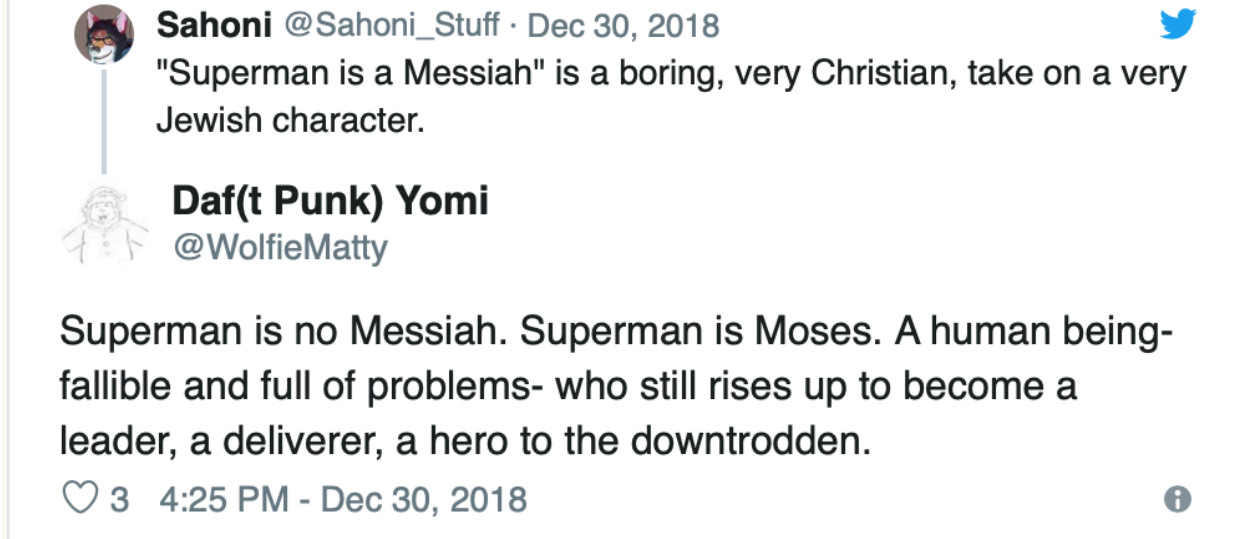
Follow

unlike captain america who is a zealous christian

9:36 PM - 8 Oct 2017

4 Retweets **1** Like

1 4 1

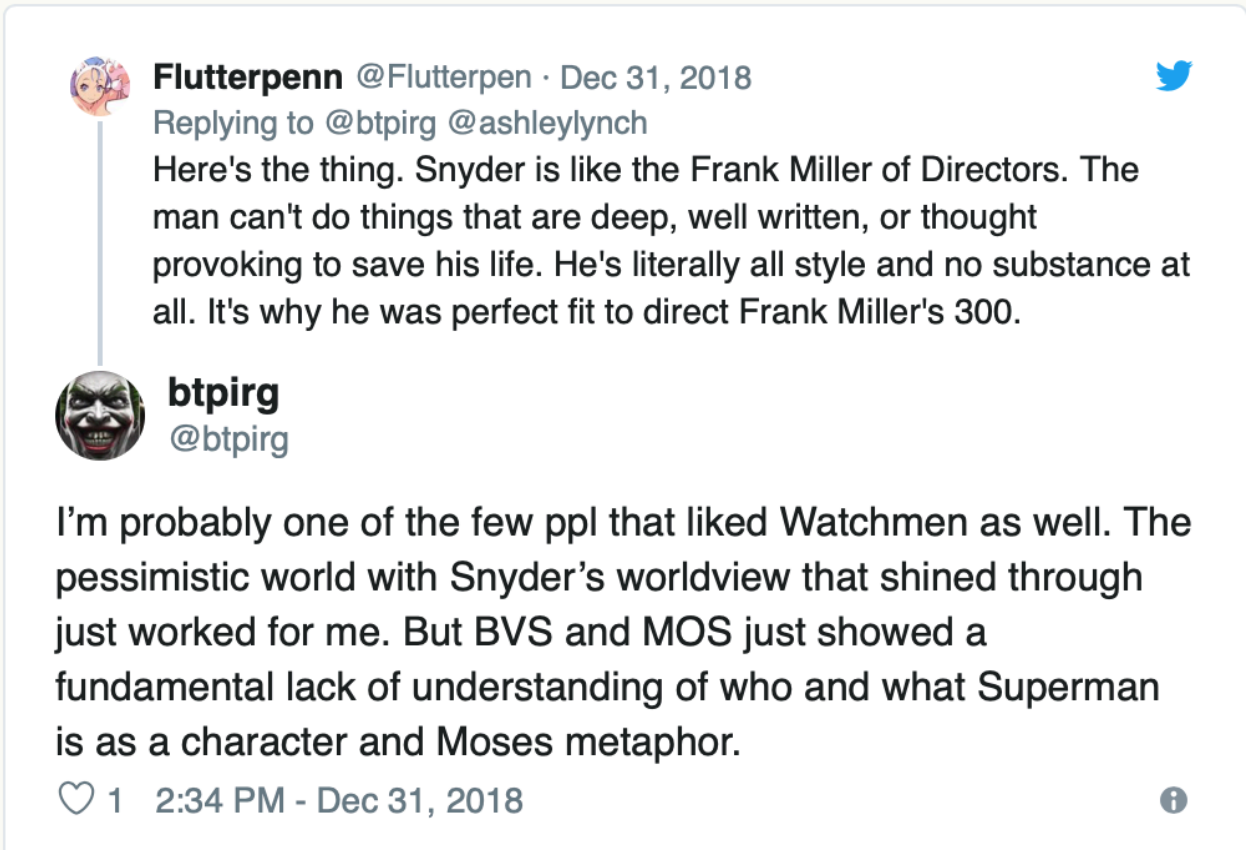


Sahoni @Sahoni_Stuff · Dec 30, 2018
"Superman is a Messiah" is a boring, very Christian, take on a very Jewish character.

Daf(t Punk) Yomi
@WolfieMatty

Superman is no Messiah. Superman is Moses. A human being- fallible and full of problems- who still rises up to become a leader, a deliverer, a hero to the downtrodden.

3 4:25 PM - Dec 30, 2018


Flutterpenn @Flutterpen · Dec 31, 2018
Replying to @btpirg @ashleylynch
Here's the thing. Snyder is like the Frank Miller of Directors. The man can't do things that are deep, well written, or thought provoking to save his life. He's literally all style and no substance at all. It's why he was perfect fit to direct Frank Miller's 300.
btpirg
@btpirg
I'm probably one of the few ppl that liked Watchmen as well. The pessimistic world with Snyder's worldview that shined through just worked for me. But BVS and MOS just showed a fundamental lack of understanding of who and what Superman is as a character and Moses metaphor.
1
2:34 PM - Dec 31, 2018

ArynTLG @ArynTlg · Jan 2, 2019

Replying to @snomid and 2 others

But as soon as the next event the new heroes are pushed to supporting roles. Their books and plotlines are consistently less prioritized. It gives the characters a very "other" feeling

impossible man
@impossibleman61

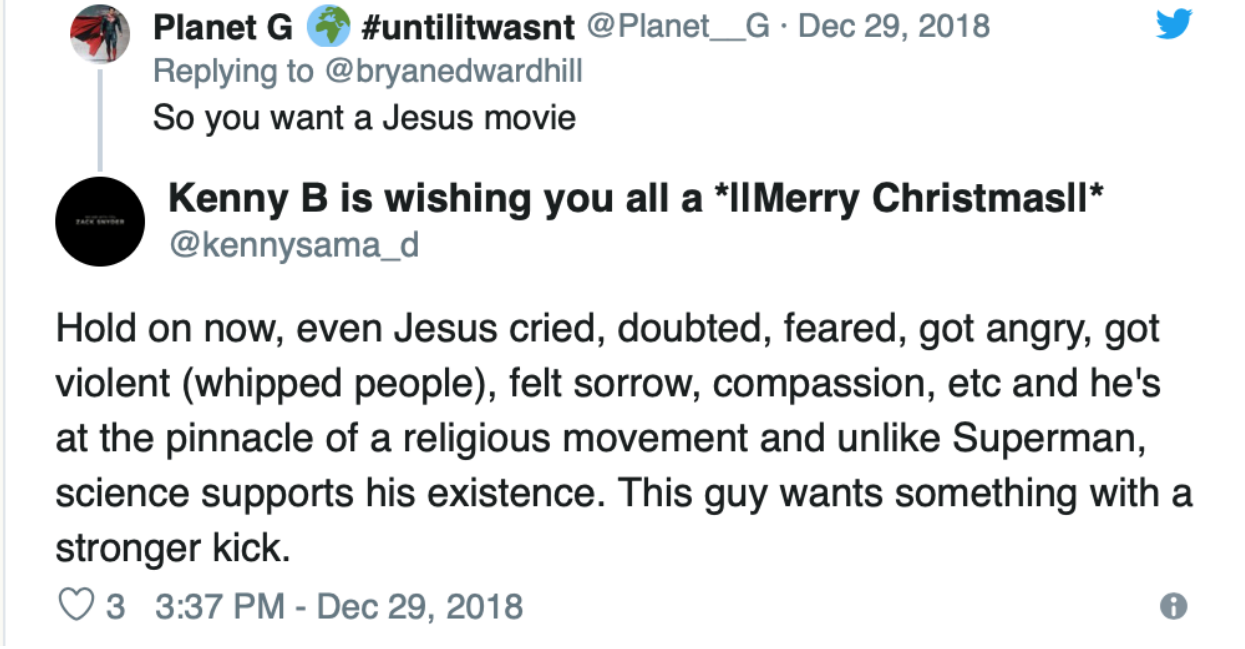
Guys these aren't "legacy" characters. buddha isn't a "legacy" god and we don't need buddha knock offs. He still works and so does Superman and the fantastic four . If you want new heroes create a new mythology with heroes you want. No one is stopping you

♡ 7 12:53 AM - Jan 3, 2019

役に立たない
@RayosEj

I aint no superman, I aint no holy ghost. Im just the one that keeps you up at night.

♡ 1 7:10 AM - Jan 4, 2019



Planet G #untilitwasnt @Planet__G · Dec 29, 2018

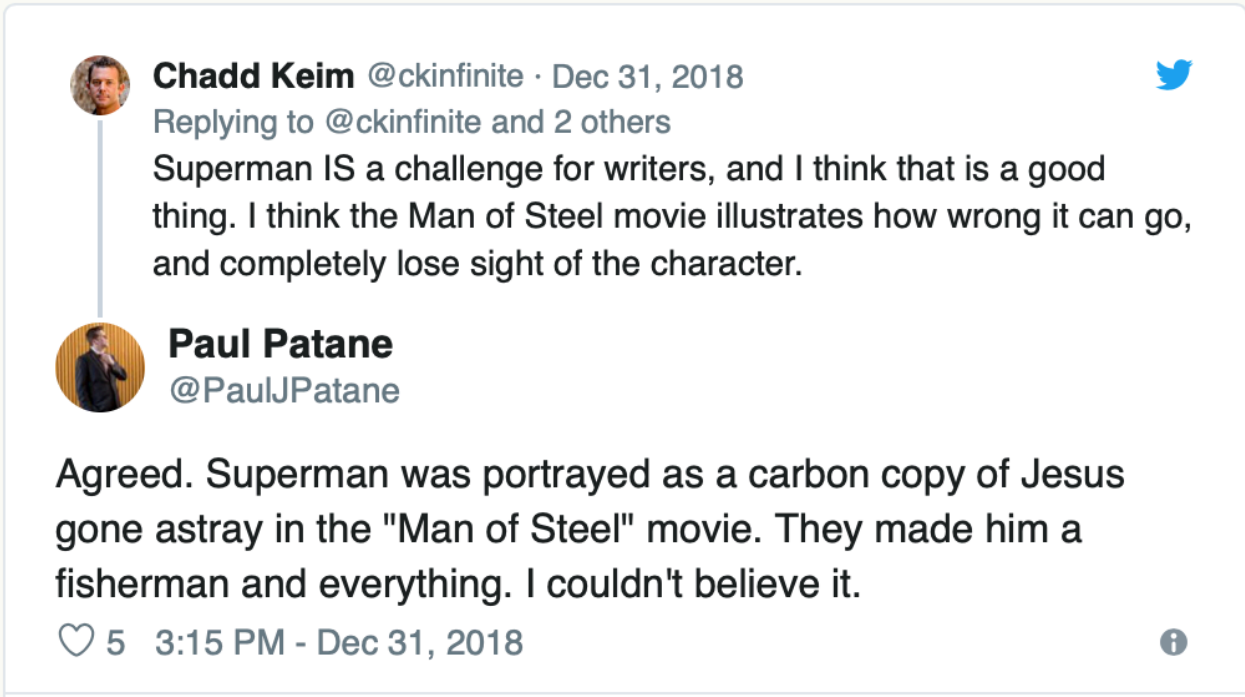
Replying to @bryanedwardhill

So you want a Jesus movie

Kenny B is wishing you all a *llMerry Christmasll* @kennysama_d

Hold on now, even Jesus cried, doubted, feared, got angry, got violent (whipped people), felt sorrow, compassion, etc and he's at the pinnacle of a religious movement and unlike Superman, science supports his existence. This guy wants something with a stronger kick.

♡ 3 3:37 PM - Dec 29, 2018



Chadd Keim @ckinfinite · Dec 31, 2018

Replying to @ckinfinite and 2 others

Superman IS a challenge for writers, and I think that is a good thing. I think the Man of Steel movie illustrates how wrong it can go, and completely lose sight of the character.

Paul Patane @PaulJPatane

Agreed. Superman was portrayed as a carbon copy of Jesus gone astray in the "Man of Steel" movie. They made him a fisherman and everything. I couldn't believe it.

♡ 5 3:15 PM - Dec 31, 2018

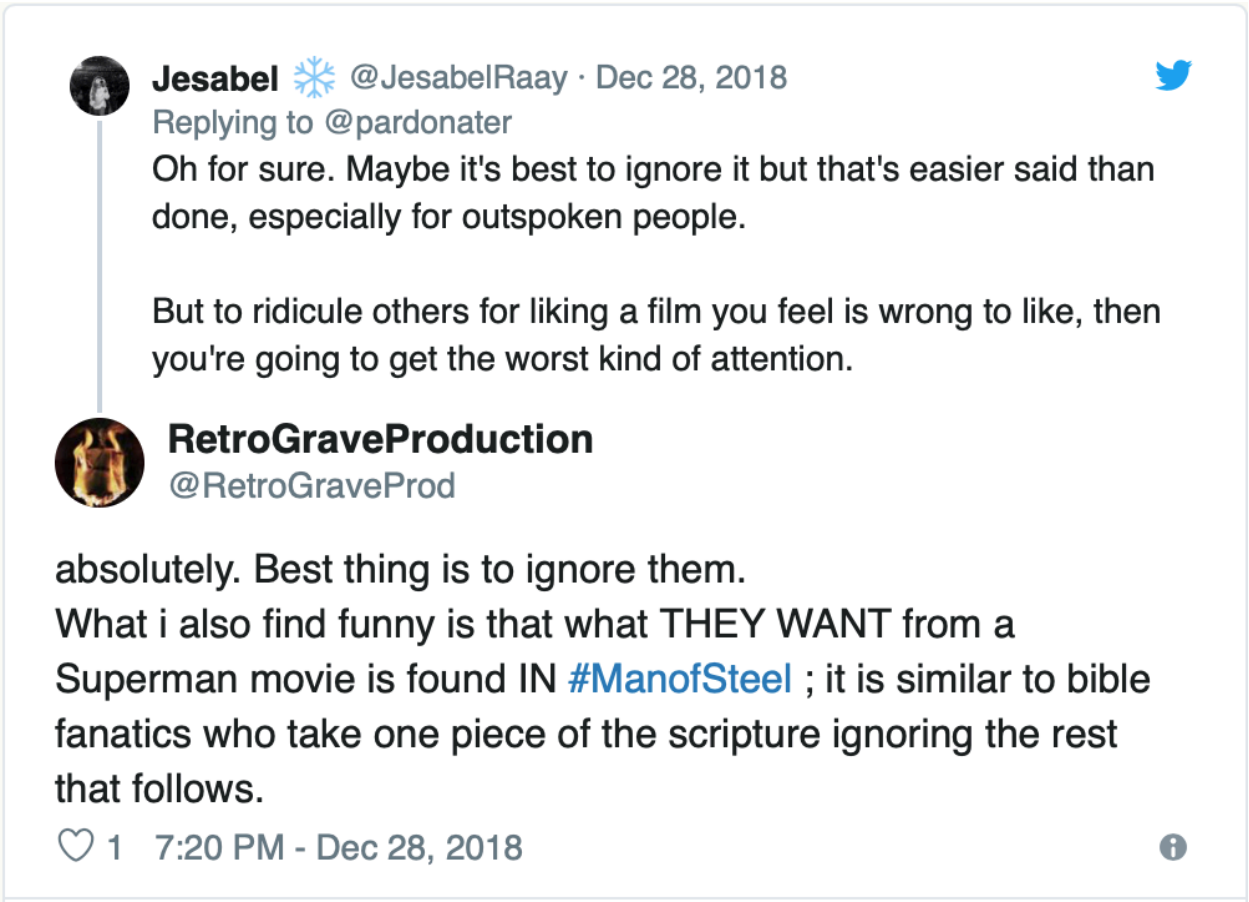
Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

Stephen, Gentleman Elf
@jaybeans

I had forgotten that Alex Ross drew future Superman as thirsty Jesus

♡ 4 10:28 PM - Jan 2, 2019


📺
@_h58_
superman is jesus
9:50 AM - Jan 3, 2019
Juha Korhonen @Juh488 · Dec 29, 2018
Replying to @mutantrevoltz @OKBJGM
His origin story still sucks and he's an alien that just happens to look just like humans do.
Julie, and now I have ID to prove it!
@mutantrevoltz
His origin story is Moses, Sargon the Great, and Zoroaster. It's an immigrant story from two immigrants.
He looks like us, and that's not realistic for aliens. If you're ok that Batman can operate for more then 2-4 years without totally ruining his body. You can handle this.
7:51 PM - Dec 29, 2018



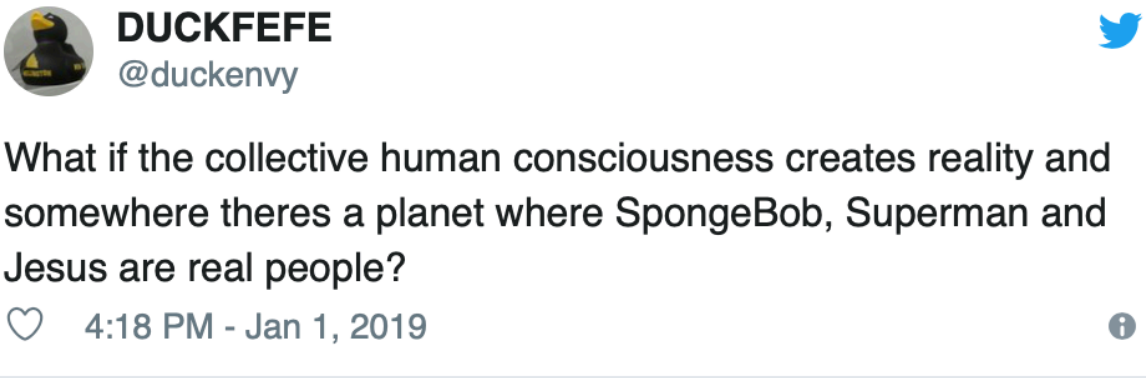
Jesabel @JesabelRaay · Dec 28, 2018
Replying to @pardonater
Oh for sure. Maybe it's best to ignore it but that's easier said than done, especially for outspoken people.

But to ridicule others for liking a film you feel is wrong to like, then you're going to get the worst kind of attention.

RetroGraveProduction
@RetroGraveProd

absolutely. Best thing is to ignore them.
What i also find funny is that what THEY WANT from a Superman movie is found IN #ManofSteel ; it is similar to bible fanatics who take one piece of the scripture ignoring the rest that follows.

♡ 1 7:20 PM - Dec 28, 2018



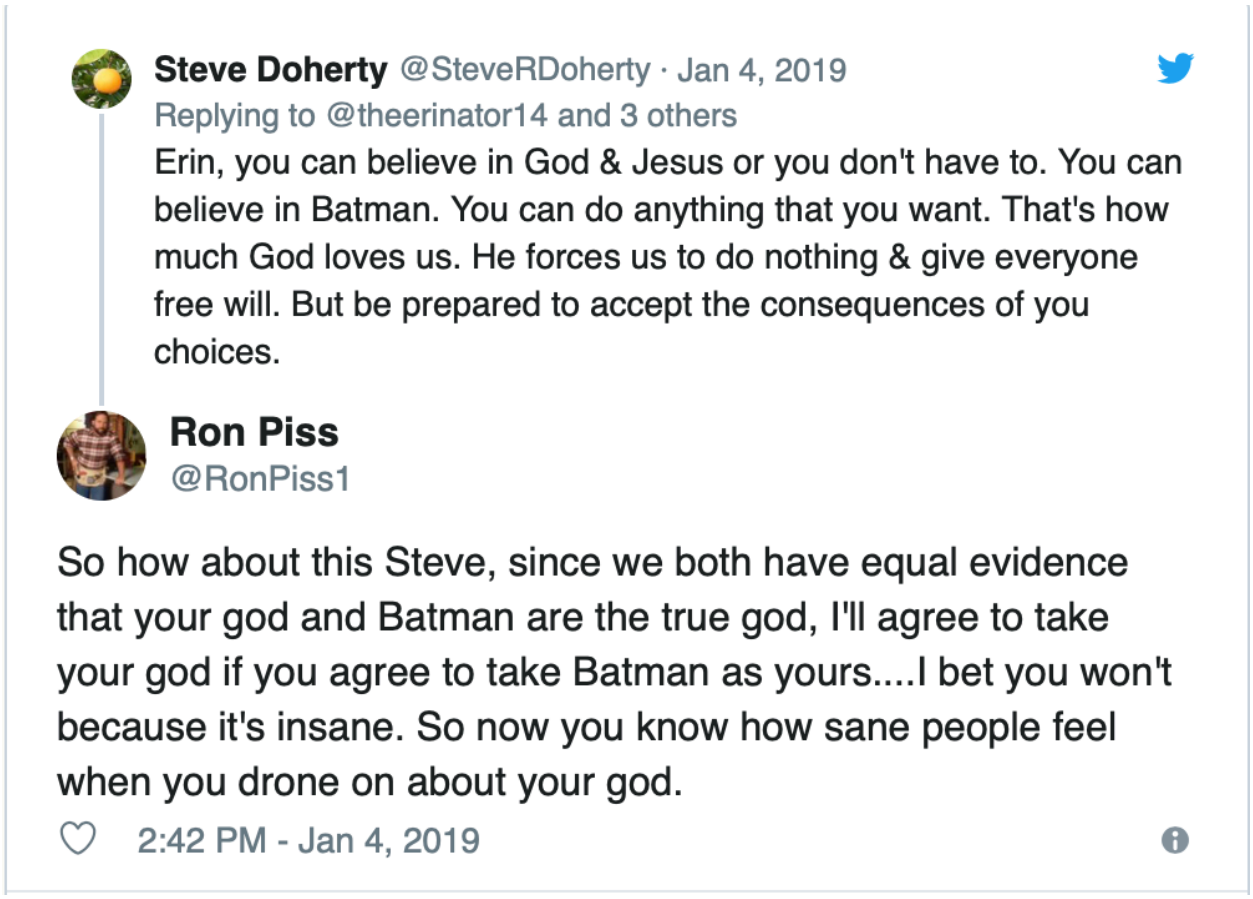
DUCKFEFE
@duckenvy

What if the collective human consciousness creates reality and somewhere theres a planet where SpongeBob, Superman and Jesus are real people?

♡ 4:18 PM - Jan 1, 2019


Super Wolf Blood Tyler Huckabee @TylerHuc... · Dec 25, 2018
Ragnarok is a Christmas movie.
Josh Powers
@powersj_tx
In that case, Superman tells the Jesus story, right?
9:28 PM - Dec 25, 2018


Sonam Mahajan @AsYouNotWish · Dec 24, 2018
Poor children get no gifts on Christmas cuz there is no Santa Claus. #MerryChristmas
Schiffskapitän
@damn_barbarian
Thts okay. There are people who believe in Jesus, Muhammad,Ram , Krishna, Batman, Superman and a million other Super heroes..
4 10:36 PM - Dec 25, 2018



Steve Doherty @SteveRDoherty · Jan 4, 2019

Replying to @theerinator14 and 3 others

Erin, you can believe in God & Jesus or you don't have to. You can believe in Batman. You can do anything that you want. That's how much God loves us. He forces us to do nothing & give everyone free will. But be prepared to accept the consequences of you choices.

Ron Piss

@RonPiss1

So how about this Steve, since we both have equal evidence that your god and Batman are the true god, I'll agree to take your god if you agree to take Batman as yours....I bet you won't because it's insane. So now you know how sane people feel when you drone on about your god.

2:42 PM - Jan 4, 2019

erin johnson @theerinator14 · Jan 4, 2019

Replying to @SteveRDoherty and 3 others

Ummmmm what if I'm not catholic and don't believe in the Bible or your god? Do I still have to follow his rules?

Ron Piss

@RonPiss1

Nobody does. It's all made up fairytale bs and people like Steve live this cult delusion. they're afraid of the boogey man sending them to hell. They're in a cult and we're all just supposed to act like they aren't crazy. Replace "Jesus" with "batman" and see how crazy it sounds

♡ 1:51 PM - Jan 4, 2019

Vickie Roark @seven4liberty · Jan 3, 2019

Replying to @MattLaslo @BiasedGirl

America is supposed to be Christian nation. What happened to using the Bible?

hotrod2001

@2001_hotrod

1. We're not a Christian Nation 2. What good does swearing an atheist, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist or Hindu on a book of faith they don't subscribe do? It's supposed to mean something to the person, otherwise you might as well swear them on a Batman comic for the same effect.

♡ 12:02 AM - Jan 4, 2019


Morgan MoonScar
@NewDrealand
Batman is more powerful than Jesus
2:53 PM - Jan 3, 2019

David Hoffman @atDavidHoffman · Jan 1, 2019

This guy is a batshit, off his rocker, nut job, maniacal, dim witted, foolish lunatic who knows “nothing” about the will of God. newsweek.com/evangelicals-w…

Jerry Falwell Jr. suggests evangelicals who don’t suppo…

Jerry Falwell Jr. also said Trump couldn't do anything to lose his support.

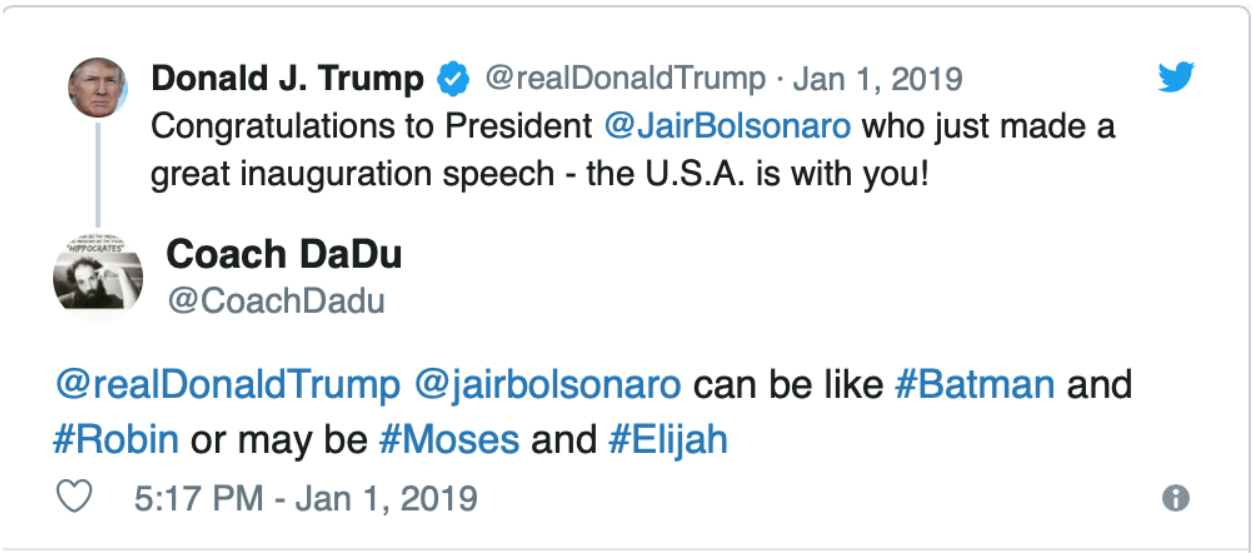
newsweek.com

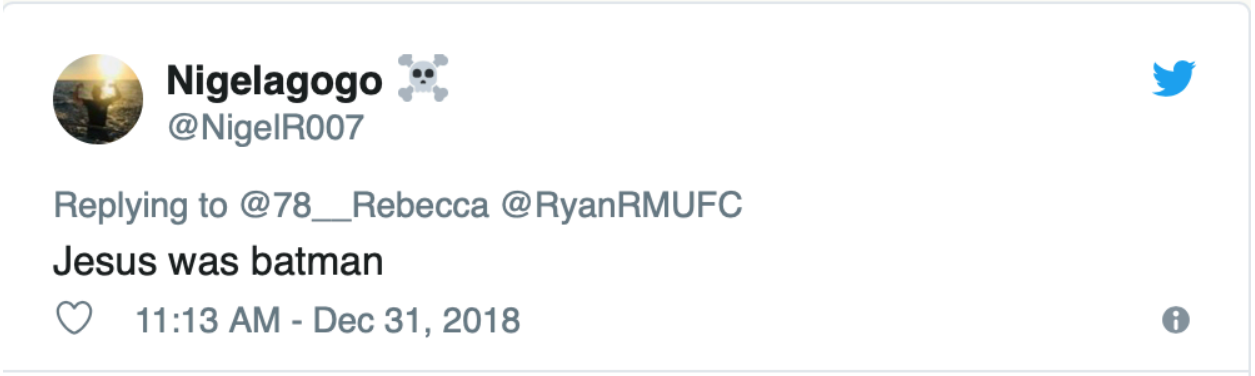
Qs Supervisor
@QsSupervisor

Arguing about the “will of god” is like arguing about the “will of Batman” or any other fictional character

If you want less absurdity in public discourse, stop putting mythological beliefs in a position of privilege

♡ 2 9:50 AM - Jan 2, 2019


Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jan 1, 2019
Congratulations to President @JairBolsonaro who just made a great inauguration speech - the U.S.A. is with you!
Coach DaDu
@CoachDadu
@realDonaldTrump @jairbolsonaro can be like #Batman and #Robin or may be #Moses and #Elijah
5:17 PM - Jan 1, 2019


Nigelagogo
@NigelR007
Replying to @78__Rebecca @RyanRMUFC
Jesus was batman
11:13 AM - Dec 31, 2018

Ken Ham @aigkenham · Dec 31, 2018

There was no Big Bang & no 'before.' God exists in eternity & created the space/mass/time universe about 6,000 yrs ago as recorded in Genesis 1:1. The earth was created 1st covered with water, the sun created on day 4, which contradicts Big Bang idea. micetimes.asia/astrophysicist…

Astrophysicists said that it was before...

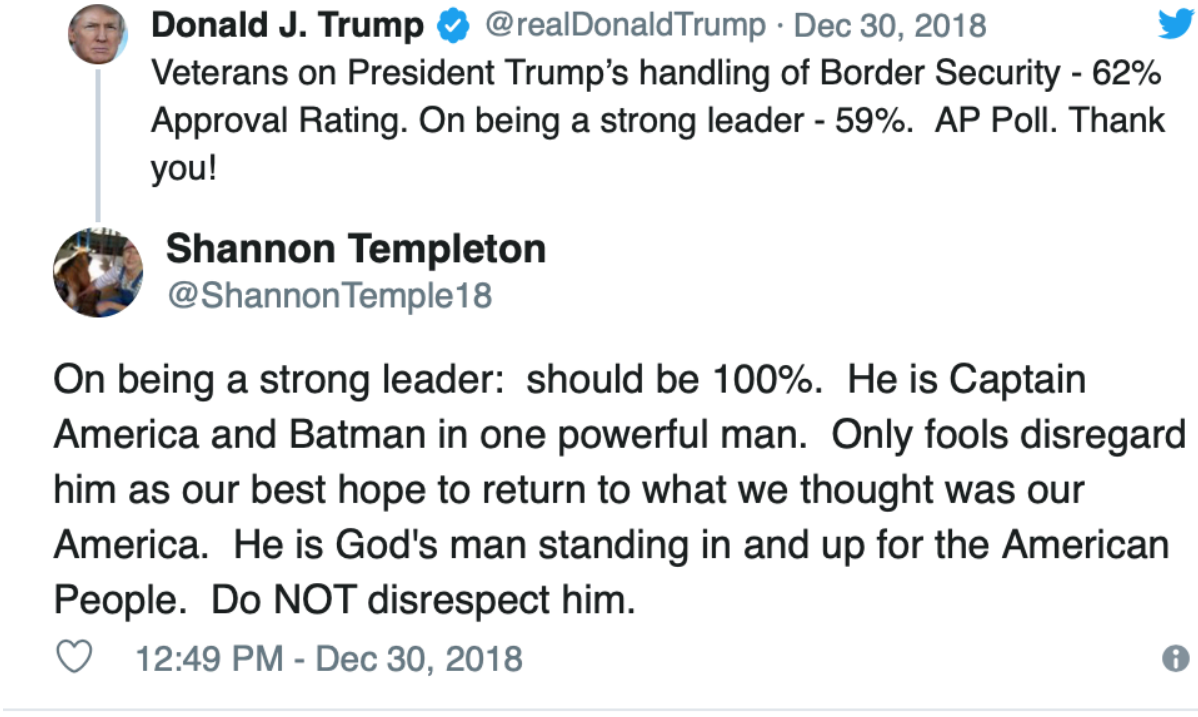
It turned out that time existed before this moment. Astrophysics from Oxford University, said that time existed before the

micetimes.asia

Paul Andrews
@PandaQuin1973

That's right, you keep believing your fairy tales. It must be true because it says so in the bible 😕 Batman and Spider-Man are true as well because it says so in this magazine.

♡ 5 7:53 AM - Dec 31, 2018



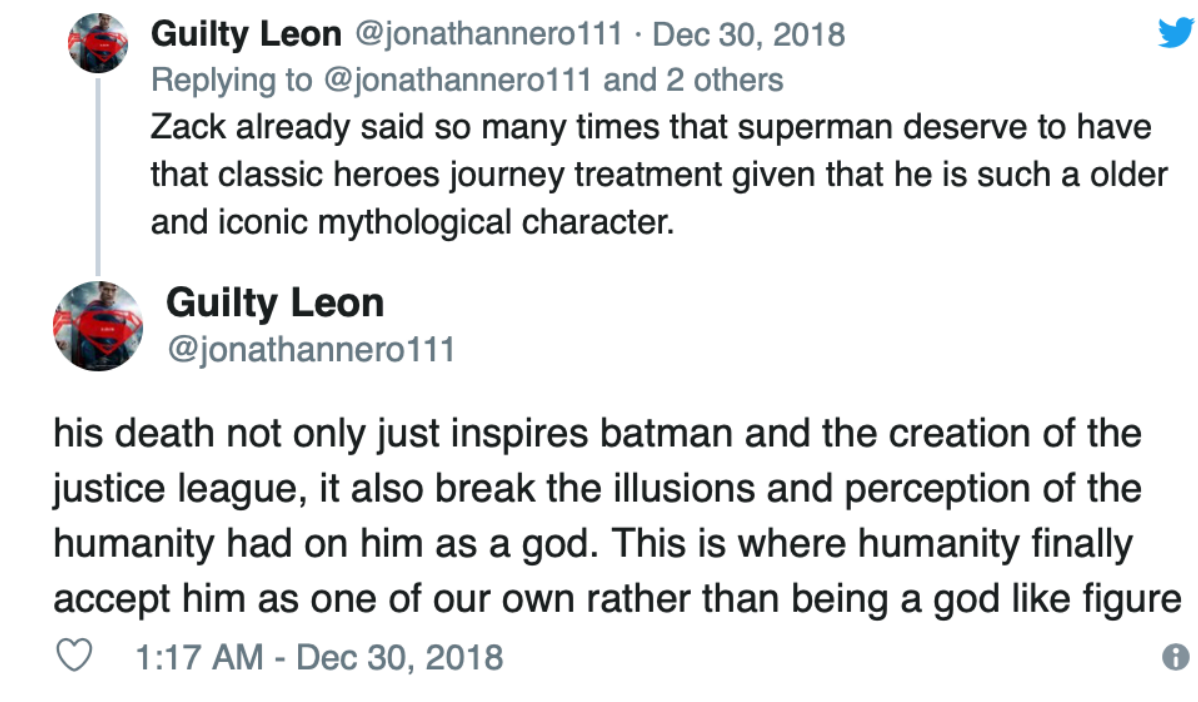
Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Dec 30, 2018

Veterans on President Trump's handling of Border Security - 62% Approval Rating. On being a strong leader - 59%. AP Poll. Thank you!

Shannon Templeton
@ShannonTemple18

On being a strong leader: should be 100%. He is Captain America and Batman in one powerful man. Only fools disregard him as our best hope to return to what we thought was our America. He is God's man standing in and up for the American People. Do NOT disrespect him.

12:49 PM - Dec 30, 2018



Guilty Leon @jonathannero111 · Dec 30, 2018

Replying to @jonathannero111 and 2 others

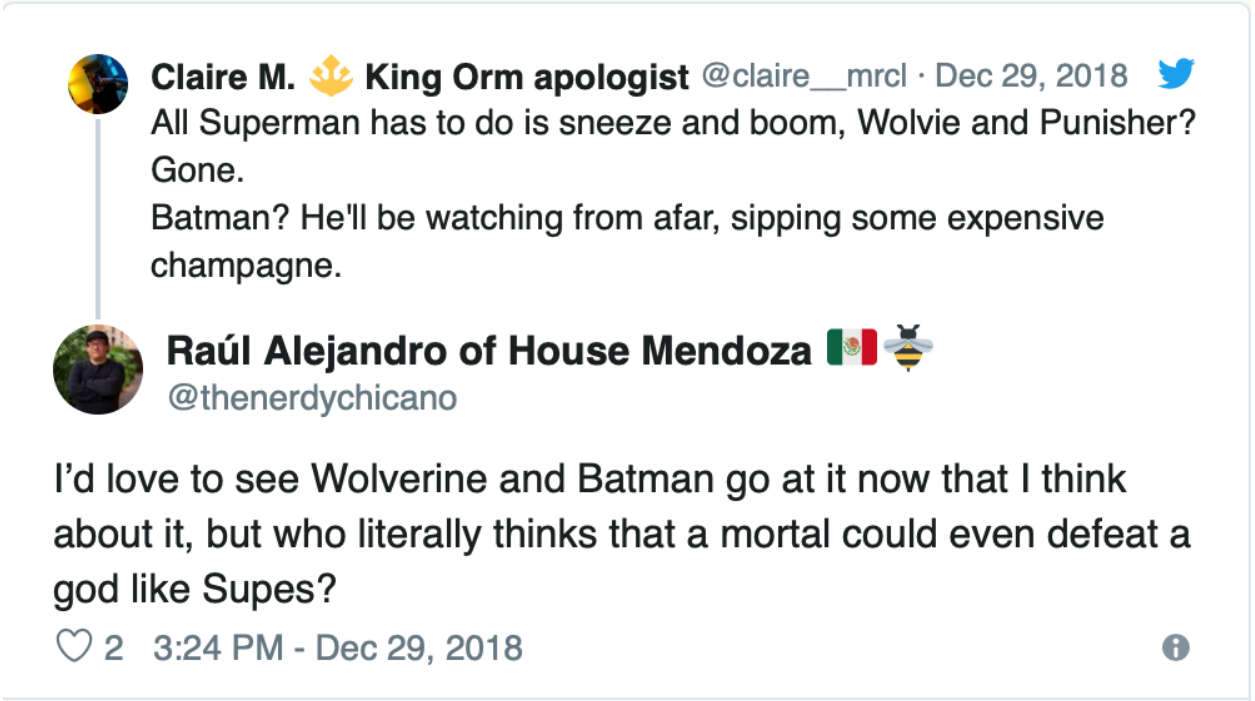
Zack already said so many times that superman deserve to have that classic heroes journey treatment given that he is such a older and iconic mythological character.

Guilty Leon
@jonathannero111

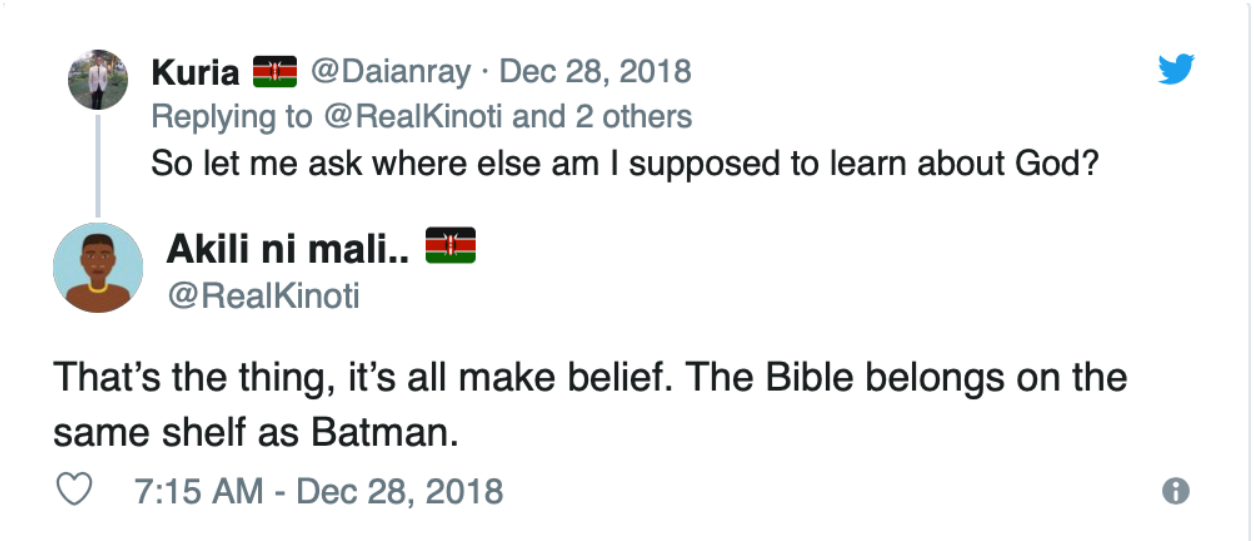
his death not only just inspires batman and the creation of the justice league, it also break the illusions and perception of the humanity had on him as a god. This is where humanity finally accept him as one of our own rather than being a god like figure

1:17 AM - Dec 30, 2018

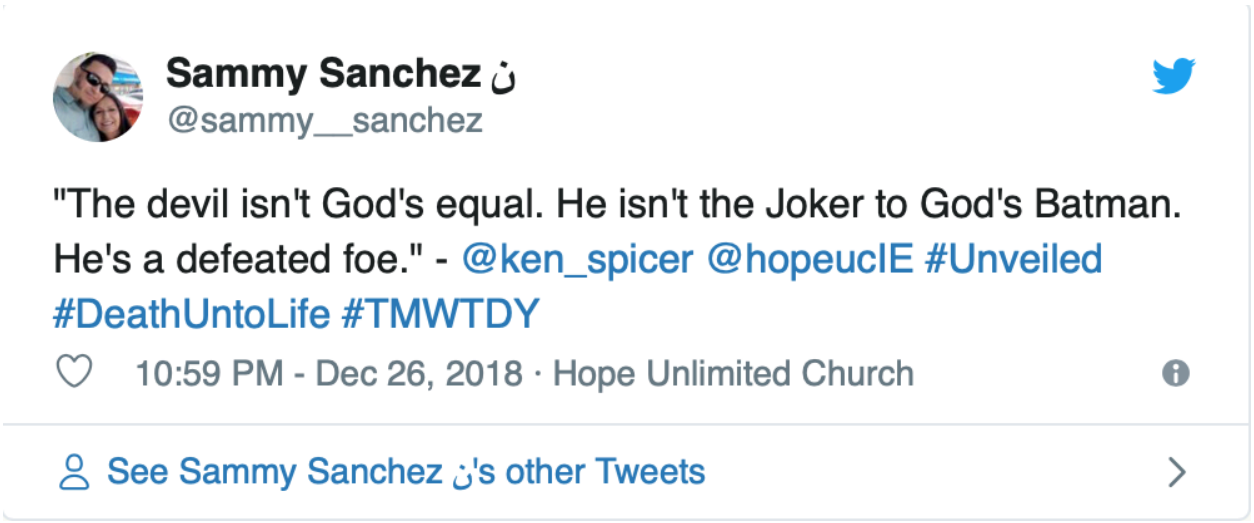

Lv. 33 Barbarian ⚔️
@TimAintCool
Batman on top of the TL as just a normal human. Every time Batman gets powers, he becomes God.
But he not the GOAT? Aight.
♡ 3 7:39 PM - Dec 29, 2018


Claire M. 👑 King Orm apologist @claire__mrcl · Dec 29, 2018
All Superman has to do is sneeze and boom, Wolvie and Punisher? Gone.
Batman? He'll be watching from afar, sipping some expensive champagne.
Raúl Alejandro of House Mendoza 🇲🇽🐝
@thenerdychicano
I'd love to see Wolverine and Batman go at it now that I think about it, but who literally thinks that a mortal could even defeat a god like Supes?
♡ 2 3:24 PM - Dec 29, 2018


Laura @womaninmedicine · Dec 29, 2018
Yup.
Kevin Durant?
@markand4503
Terrific when people don't capitalize 'God' because they think he's fake.....but they capitalize Batman and Darth Vader.
It's a proper noun.
Your belief system doesn't change grammar.
5 2:11 AM - Dec 29, 2018


Kuria @Daianray · Dec 28, 2018
Replying to @RealKinoti and 2 others
So let me ask where else am I supposed to learn about God?
Akili ni mali..
@RealKinoti
That's the thing, it's all make belief. The Bible belongs on the same shelf as Batman.
7:15 AM - Dec 28, 2018


Nathan
@Nathan__1
Calling yourself a god when you have no powers is like calling Robin Hood, Batman, Ironman a superhero
10:52 AM - Dec 27, 2018


Sammy Sanchez ن
@sammy__sanchez
"The devil isn't God's equal. He isn't the Joker to God's Batman. He's a defeated foe." - @ken_spicer @hopeucIE #Unveiled #DeathUntoLife #TMWTDY
10:59 PM - Dec 26, 2018 · Hope Unlimited Church
See Sammy Sanchez ن's other Tweets

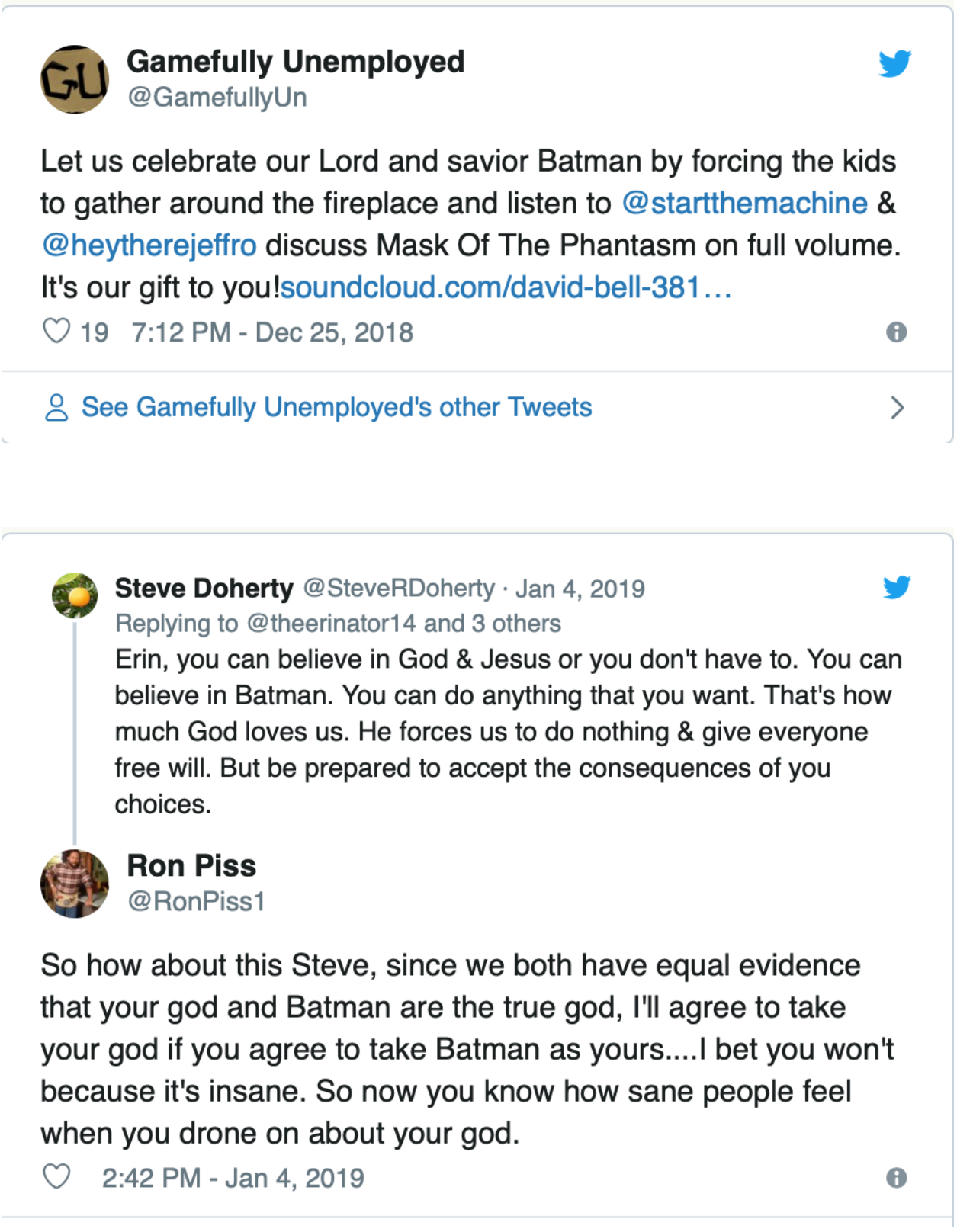
Pablo Diablo Bonzo
@PabloBonzo

When I tell people my faith in a higher power let's me know I'm doing the right thing, they try to get me sectioned! Admittedly I'm usually nude, shouting/laughing at people on the high street & my higher power is Batman...but that's beside the point.
independent.co.uk/news/uk/politi…

11:49 AM - Dec 26, 2018

Theresa May says her faith in God gives her confidence she is...
Theresa May has described how her faith in God makes her convinced she is “doing the right thing” as Prime Minister. In a rare
independent.co.uk

See Pablo Diablo Bonzo's other Tweets


Gamefully Unemployed
@GamefullyUn
Let us celebrate our Lord and savior Batman by forcing the kids to gather around the fireplace and listen to @startthemachine & @heytherejeffro discuss Mask Of The Phantasm on full volume. It's our gift to you!soundcloud.com/david-bell-381…
19 7:12 PM - Dec 25, 2018
See Gamefully Unemployed's other Tweets
Steve Doherty @SteveRDoherty · Jan 4, 2019
Replying to @theerinator14 and 3 others
Erin, you can believe in God & Jesus or you don't have to. You can believe in Batman. You can do anything that you want. That's how much God loves us. He forces us to do nothing & give everyone free will. But be prepared to accept the consequences of you choices.
Ron Piss
@RonPiss1
So how about this Steve, since we both have equal evidence that your god and Batman are the true god, I'll agree to take your god if you agree to take Batman as yours....I bet you won't because it's insane. So now you know how sane people feel when you drone on about your god.
2:42 PM - Jan 4, 2019

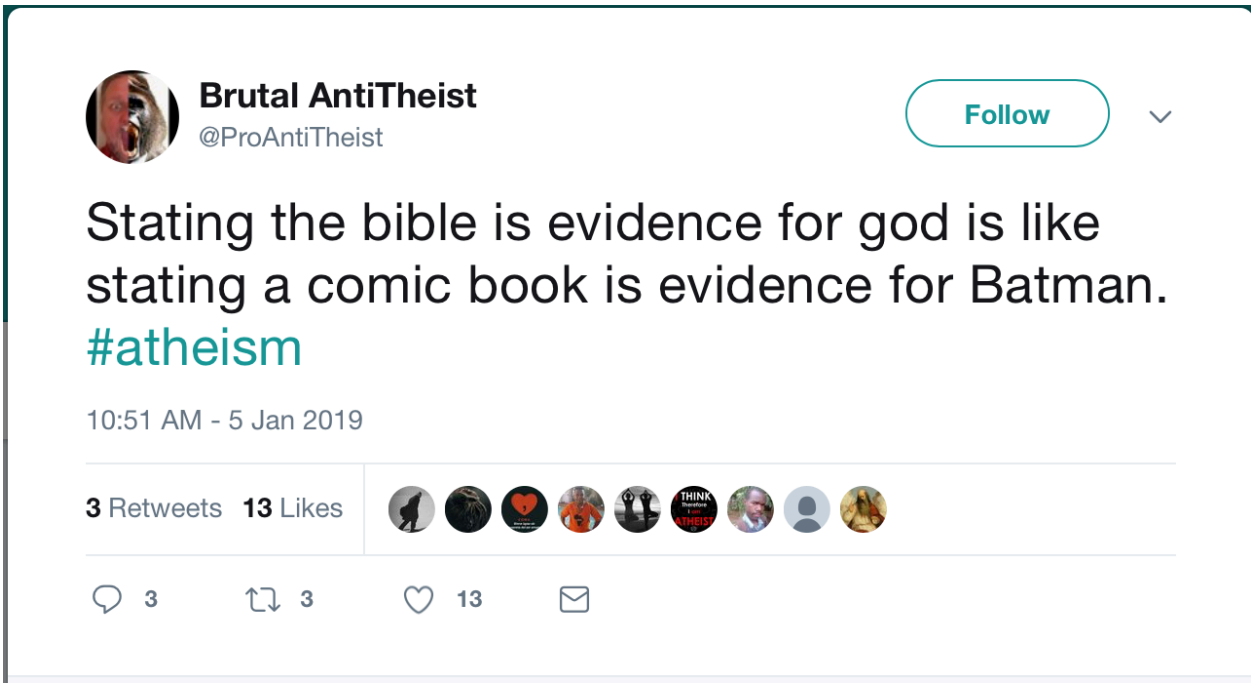

Brutal AntiTheist
@ProAntiTheist
Follow
Stating the bible is evidence for god is like stating a comic book is evidence for Batman. #atheism
10:51 AM - 5 Jan 2019
3 Retweets 13 Likes
3
3
13

Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons


Sam Palmeri
@NthMetalMace
Follow
Their faith in Batman is stronger than in Jesus. Has to be.
twitter.com/kristaferanka/…
This Tweet is unavailable.
7:12 PM - 5 Jan 2019
Tweet your reply
Trends for you
Dr. King
Kamala Harris
#MLKDay
#MLK2019
#NationalHuggingDay
CBC News
Melo
Mikko Koskinen
Darryl Plecas
Peter Chiarelli

Dianna
@GrlpantsGR

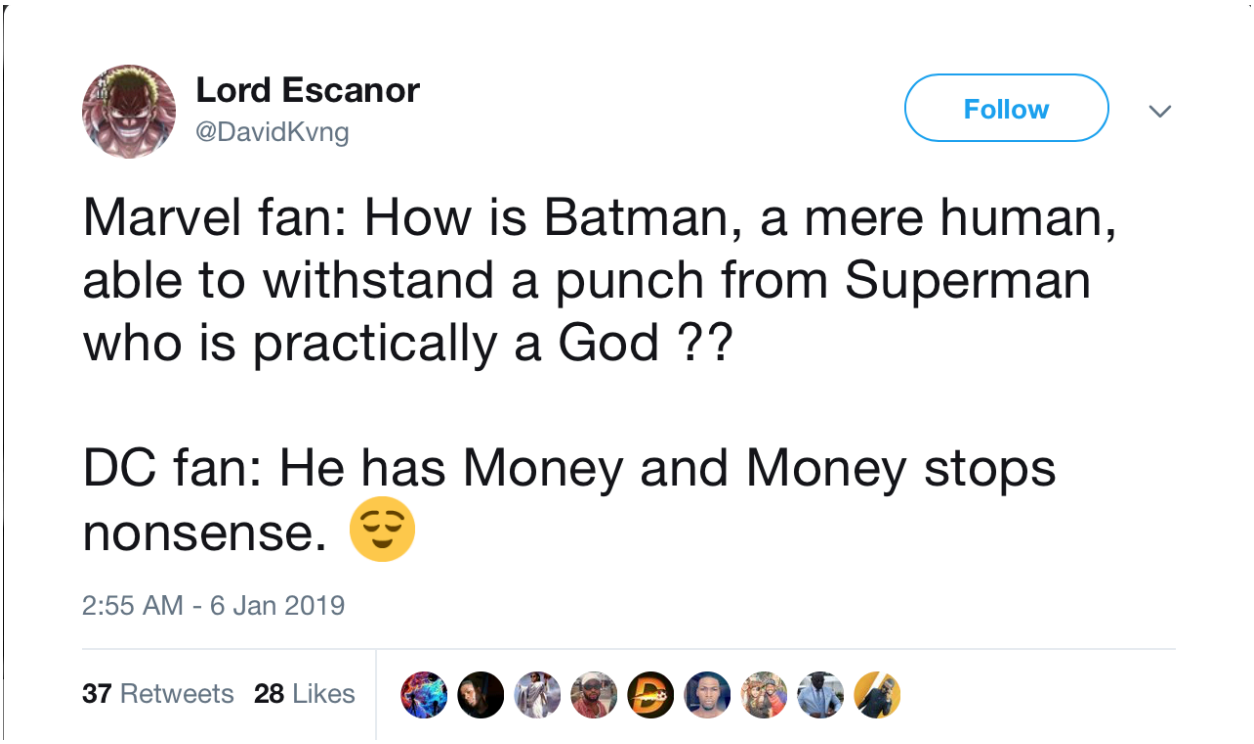
Follow

The Holy Trinity: Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman
Spider-Man

Comic Relief Podcast @ComicReliefPodc
What four characters that are the most iconic - of ANY comic company - would you place on the 4 Faces of Comic Mount Rushmore? We are not talking favorites but iconic! Feel free to tag others and have them join in the conversation!

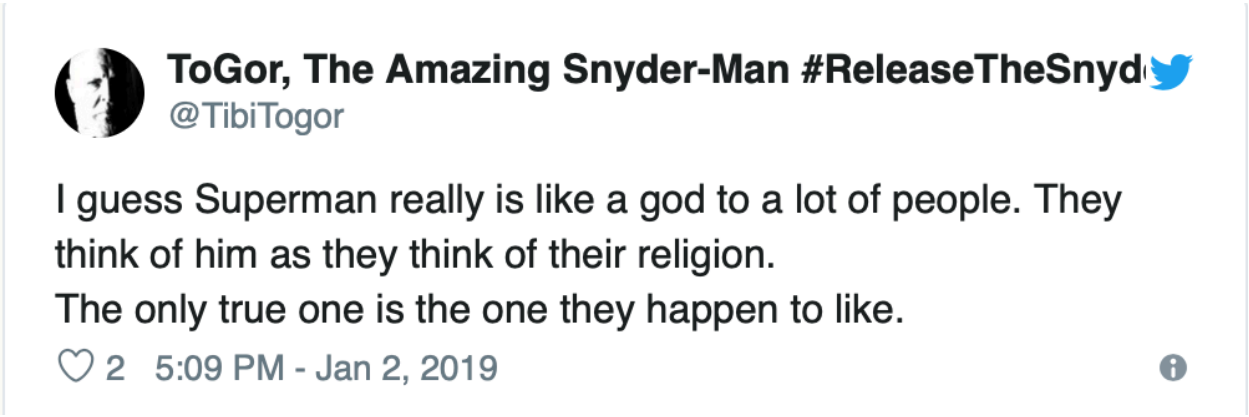
1:39 AM - 6 Jan 2019

Tweet your reply


Lord Escanor
@DavidKvng
Follow
Marvel fan: How is Batman, a mere human, able to withstand a punch from Superman who is practically a God ??
DC fan: He has Money and Money stops nonsense.
2:55 AM - 6 Jan 2019
37 Retweets 28 Likes

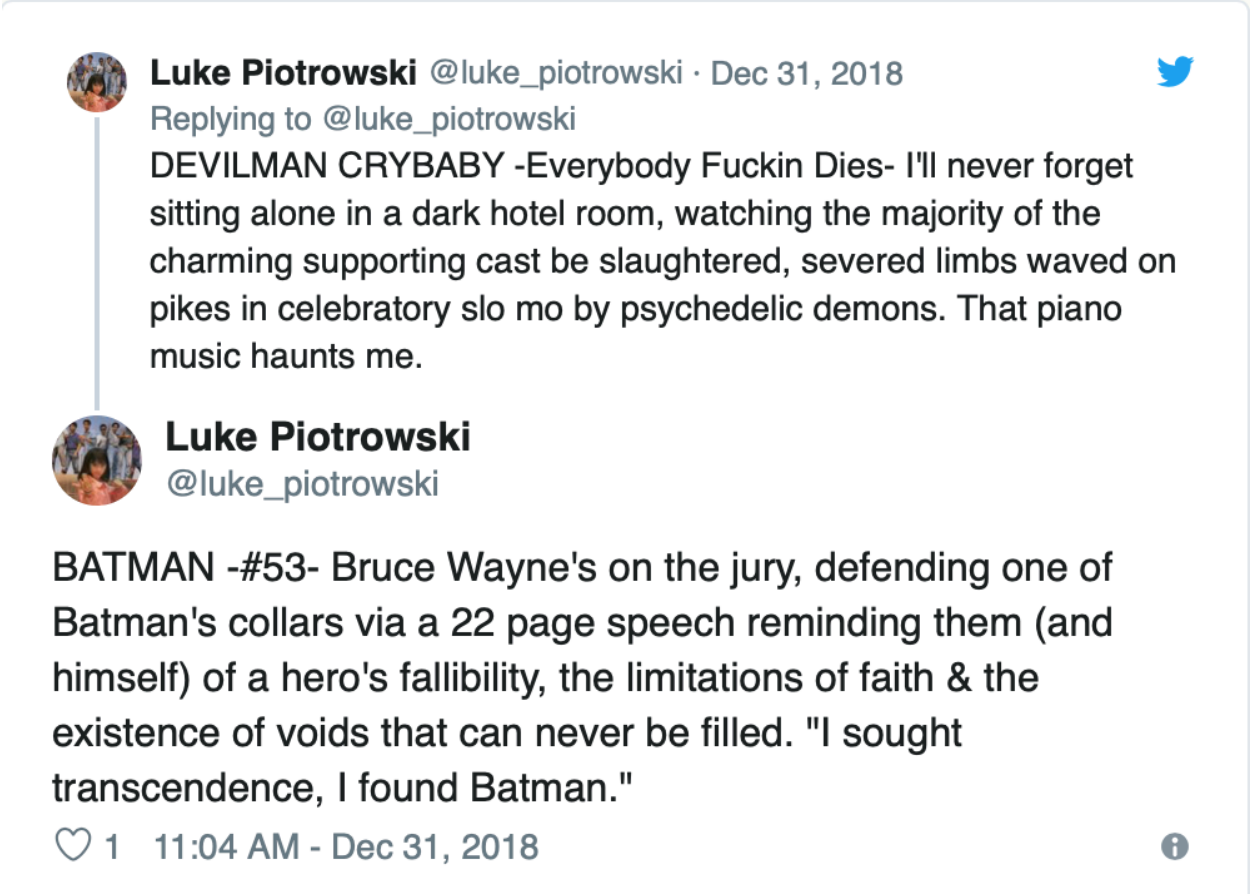

YHWH
@CpzLqNsht
GOKU IS SAID TO BE THE MOST POWERFUL CHARACTER EVER CREATED FOLLOWED BY THOR & THEN SUPERMAN. JESUS CHRIST NOT EVEN MAKING TOP 100 LMAO
112 10:18 AM - Aug 24, 2017


@Msihlez_Da_makerRSA @Msihlez93 · Dec 25, 2018
Xmas is a term or a word that was created by Satanists to avoid saying Christ word so instead of Christ the replaced X and it was Xmas to them now to you who say merry Xmas what ya'll implying vele?
FLIP TOP
@FLIPTOP1
Imaginary Jesus Fucking Christ is as real as Superman, Spiderman, Batman & Blackpanther.
5:52 AM - Dec 25, 2018


ToGor, The Amazing Snyder-Man #ReleaseTheSnyd
@TibiTogor
I guess Superman really is like a god to a lot of people. They think of him as they think of their religion.
The only true one is the one they happen to like.
2 5:09 PM - Jan 2, 2019

Appendix C:


ChiMom @chi3mom · Feb 10, 2019
Replying to @KimHoll77281338 and 2 others
So imagine if Thanos forced the universe to worship Him, it wouldn't be true honoring worship, God gives us the choice....dictators force people to bow and comply. God wants you to come to Him.
Kim Holloway
@KimHoll77281338
Fuck that. Thanos is also a psychopath - but I DO love the comparison coz that means that atheists are basically Captain America fighting back against the immoral tyranny of Thanos/God.
1:07 AM - Feb 10, 2019
See Kim Holloway 's other Tweets


Luke Piotrowski @luke_piotrowski · Dec 31, 2018
Replying to @luke_piotrowski
DEVILMAN CRYBABY -Everybody Fuckin Dies- I'll never forget sitting alone in a dark hotel room, watching the majority of the charming supporting cast be slaughtered, severed limbs waved on pikes in celebratory slo mo by psychedelic demons. That piano music haunts me.
Luke Piotrowski
@luke_piotrowski
BATMAN -#53- Bruce Wayne's on the jury, defending one of Batman's collars via a 22 page speech reminding them (and himself) of a hero's fallibility, the limitations of faith & the existence of voids that can never be filled. "I sought transcendence, I found Batman."
1
11:04 AM - Dec 31, 2018

Batman🔥💫 @BatmanResist · Dec 28, 2018

Replying to @TheSWPrincess and 18 others

🙏Thank you Leia!🙏

In 2018 I learned everything I could about campaign donations, dark money, and winning elections, lots of them. 💫

Thank you, 1st and foremost, @ScarletAvengers for every step of the way. 💠🦇🧙‍♀️🔥💫♾️

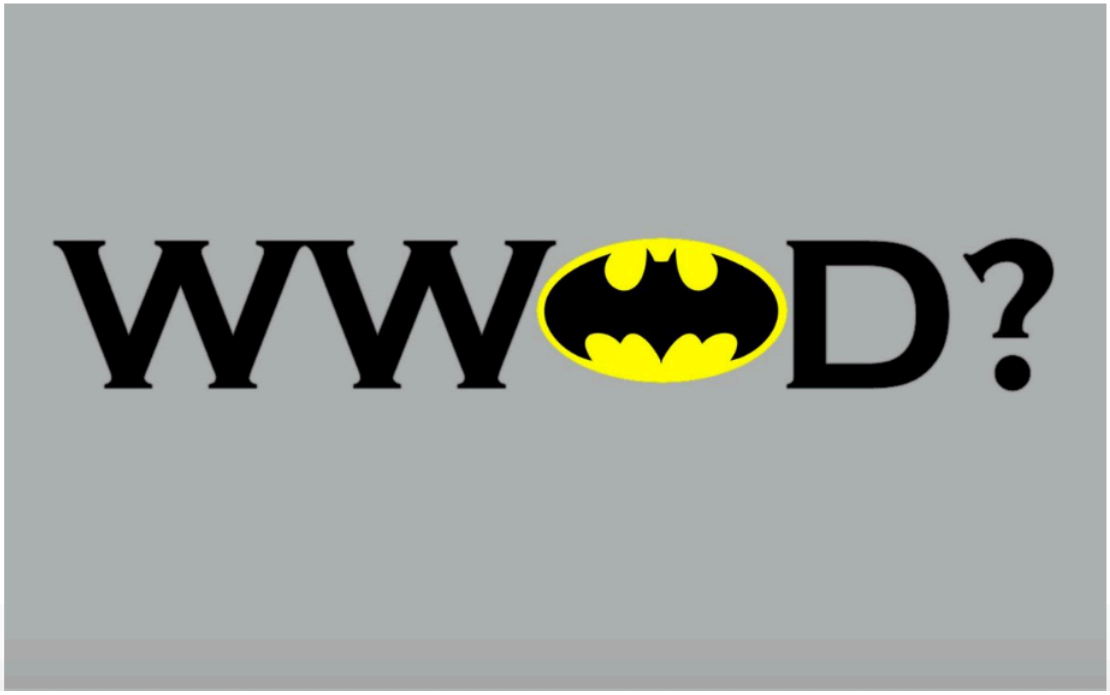
🙏 @ElastigirlVotes
🙏@jomareewade
🙏 @propornot

BebopSpaceCowgirl 🌊
@jomareewade

Thank you Batman, and it's mutual ✊✊✊

Your constant battle against dark money is mega inspirational!
pic.twitter.com/yr0EpmBNVE

♡ 8 7:32 PM - Dec 28, 2018



Kaitlyn Schiess @KaitlynSchiess · Dec 24, 2018

My mom knew I was worried the Christmas Eve service at their church was going to be...less than reverent.

So during the first song ("Winter Wonderland" sung with white beach balls batted around the sanctuary) she whispered to me, "Next year we'll go to the Episcopal church."

Alex Wisnoski
@polishamigo

We switched churches after an eastern sermon entitled "why Jesus is better than Superman". The week before was "Jesus is better than bacon".

♡ 17 9:23 PM - Dec 24, 2018


Minister Faust @MinisterFaust · Feb 9, 2019
Replying to @nberlat @TravisBernhardt
1. Not anti-colonialist? Imperialist Harkonnens destroyed. Imperialist Emperor sent into exile on Salusa Secundus. Atreides saved only via alliance w/the Fremen (whom them later betray and control). Galactic feudal-colonialism continually condemned. "Substantially smarter" is...
Minister Faust
@MinisterFaust
2. subjective. I love Watchmen, but the two works address different matters, and Dune examines society via feminism far more than Watchmen does, and dozens of other issues including religion, because it also has more room to do so.
1:40 PM - Feb 9, 2019
See Minister Faust's other Tweets

Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

Hills Kidz
@HillsKidz

Or Big Hero series kicked off with THE Captain America (and a small imposter, pictured). We're all about seeing ourselves in God's image this month. New Memory Verse to practice at home:
"God is our refuge and strength. An ever-present help in trouble."
Psalm 46:1

8:00 AM - Feb 13, 2019

See Hills Kidz's other Tweets

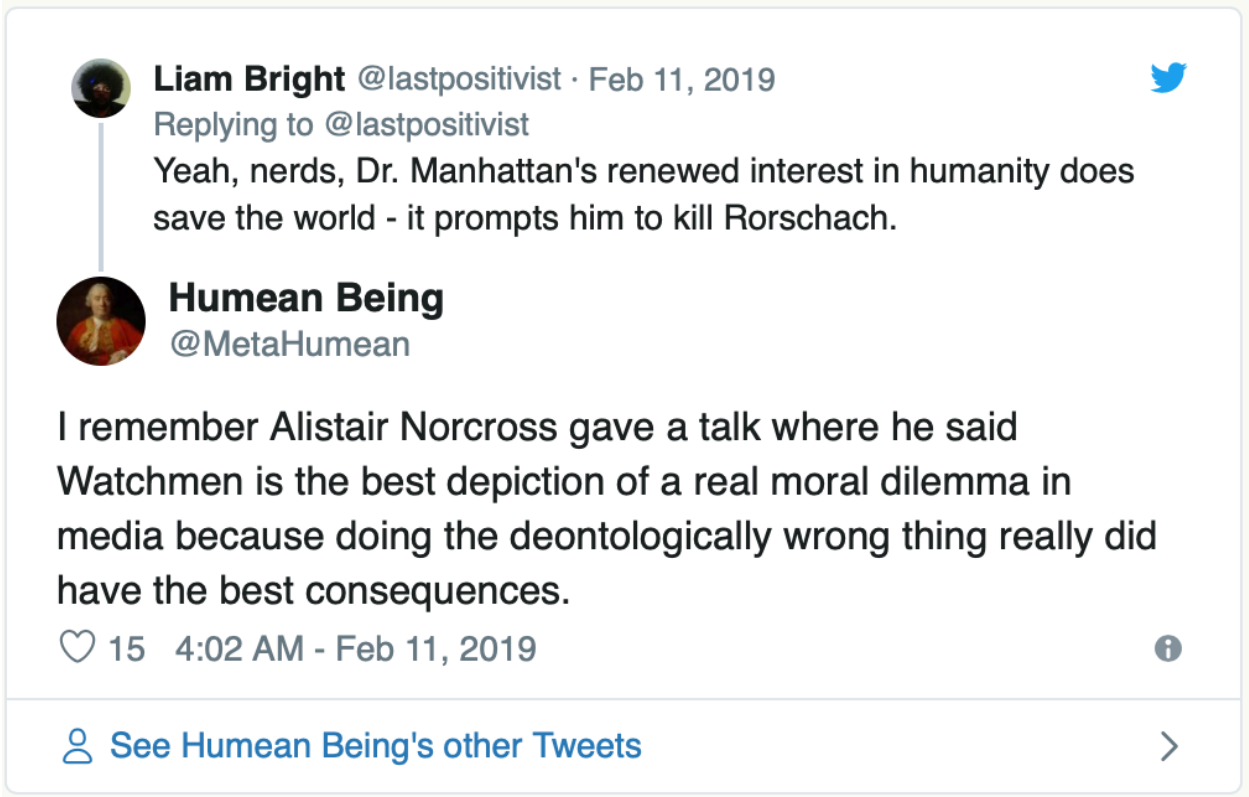
Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

Ronnie Shirley
@LizardLickTowin

#DirtWord #LickLife
One of my favorite lines in a movie “they’re almost like Gods”. “Ma’am, there’s only one God, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.”
– Captain
America

♡ 13 9:29 PM - Feb 15, 2019

See Ronnie Shirley's other Tweets



Liam Bright @lastpositivist · Feb 11, 2019
Replying to @lastpositivist
Yeah, nerds, Dr. Manhattan's renewed interest in humanity does save the world - it prompts him to kill Rorschach.

Humean Being
@MetaHumean

I remember Alistair Norcross gave a talk where he said Watchmen is the best depiction of a real moral dilemma in media because doing the deontologically wrong thing really did have the best consequences.

♡ 15 4:02 AM - Feb 11, 2019

See Humean Being's other Tweets


Eric Palacios @arturocurry_ · Feb 12, 2019
One of my favorite indie books that I read that I RARELY talk about is 'Relay.' It is a fantastic book by Cates, Zac Thompson and Andy Clarke. It's only 3 issues in, (with a 0 issue and issue 4 out next week) but it's been fantastic from start to current.
Eric Palacios
@arturocurry_
Andy Clarke's art is so detailed and slick. It reminds me a lot of Dave Gibbon's art in Watchmen. I know that's high praise, but I think it's that good. It gives you a lot to think about. About following religion absolutely vs following religion, but having some doubt in what..
12:14 AM - Feb 12, 2019
See Eric Palacios's other Tweets

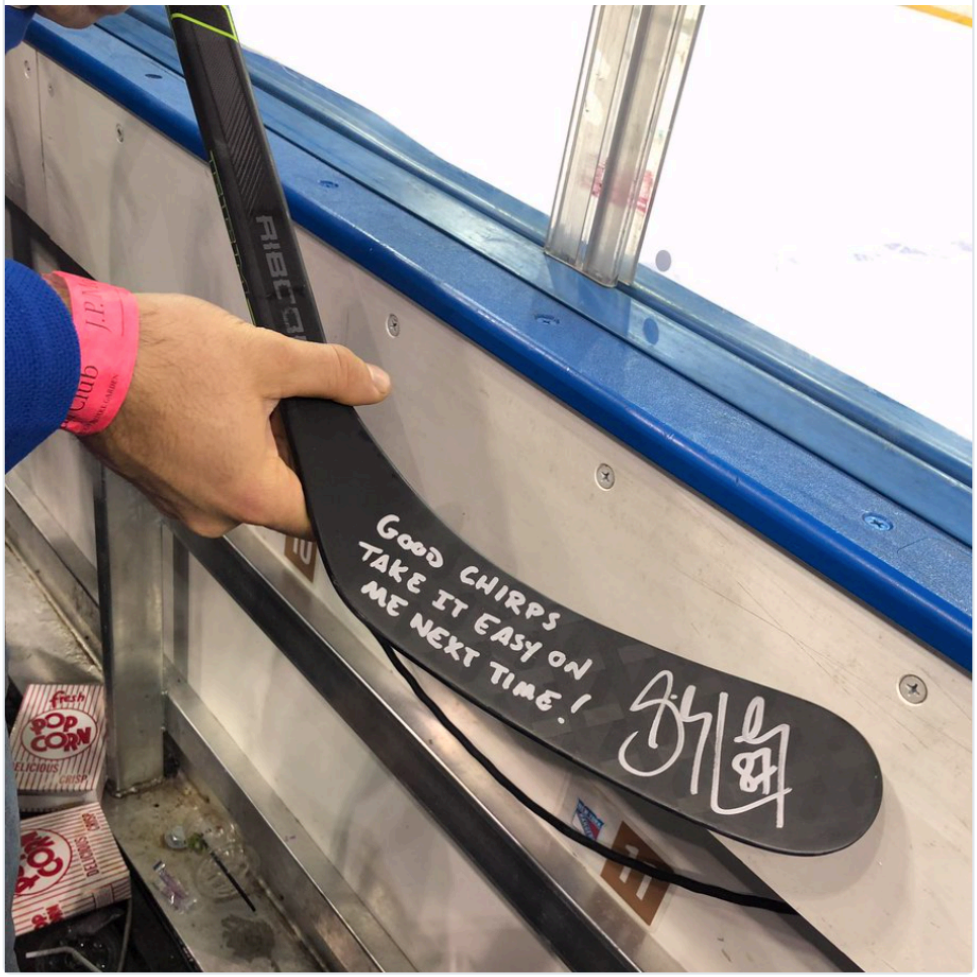

Kiya "Steamboat" Nicoll @kiya_nicoll · Feb 9, 2019
Replying to @asha_lh
(Followed @elektrotal here.)
When Oldest asked me what a god was, I told her, "A god is a story that's alive."
Kiya "Steamboat" Nicoll
@kiya_nicoll
Now I have time to come back to this, briefly, I note that we had several subsequent conversations about what it meant for a story to be alive, what stories *mean* anyway, and whether under that definition Captain America was a god.
10:42 PM - Feb 9, 2019
See Kiya "Steamboat" Nicoll's other Tweets


Mike Landry
@mikeisthird
My latest for @grandinmedia - "Stay close to Jesus, and learn the truth" (with a little Captain America: Civil War for good measure):grandinmedia.ca/task-simple-st…
7 2:22 PM - Feb 8, 2019
Our task is simple: stay close to Jesus, and …
If you've ever seen the movie Captain America: Civil War, you might recall that Captain...
grandinmedia.ca
See Mike Landry's other Tweets

Mats Kalinka
@MatsKalinka

Has anyone ever seen Crosby and Batman and Jesus in the same place at the same time???

> **Sports Illustrated** @SInow
> Sidney Crosby knows good chirping when he hears it—even if he's the target.
>
> He apparently had a trainer deliver this to a guy sitting next to the penalty box who was lighting him up all game during Pens-Rangers on Wednesday.
>
> (h/t @pickledotcom)



2:02 PM - Jan 3, 2019

Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

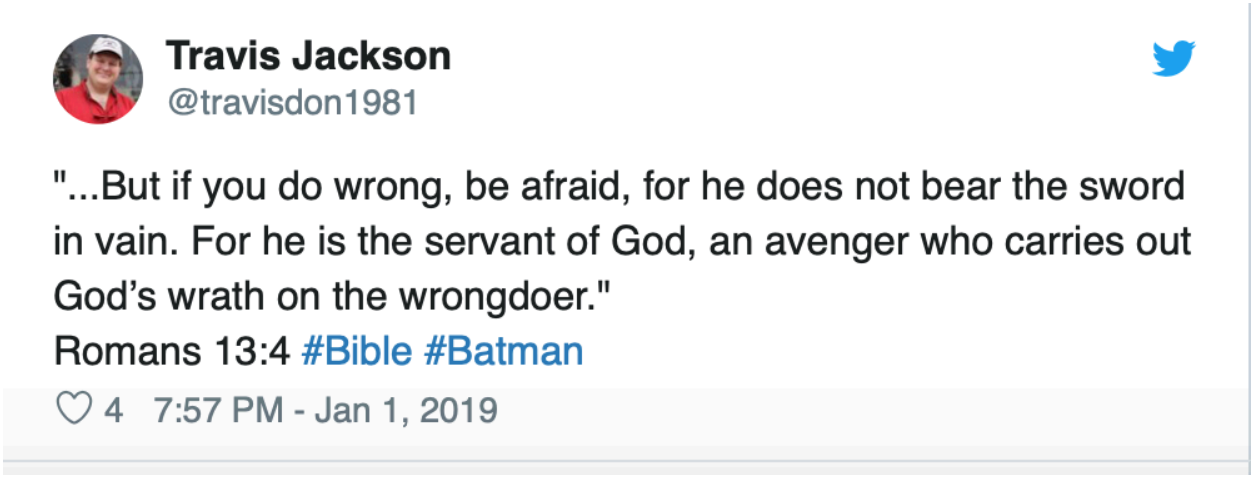


Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons

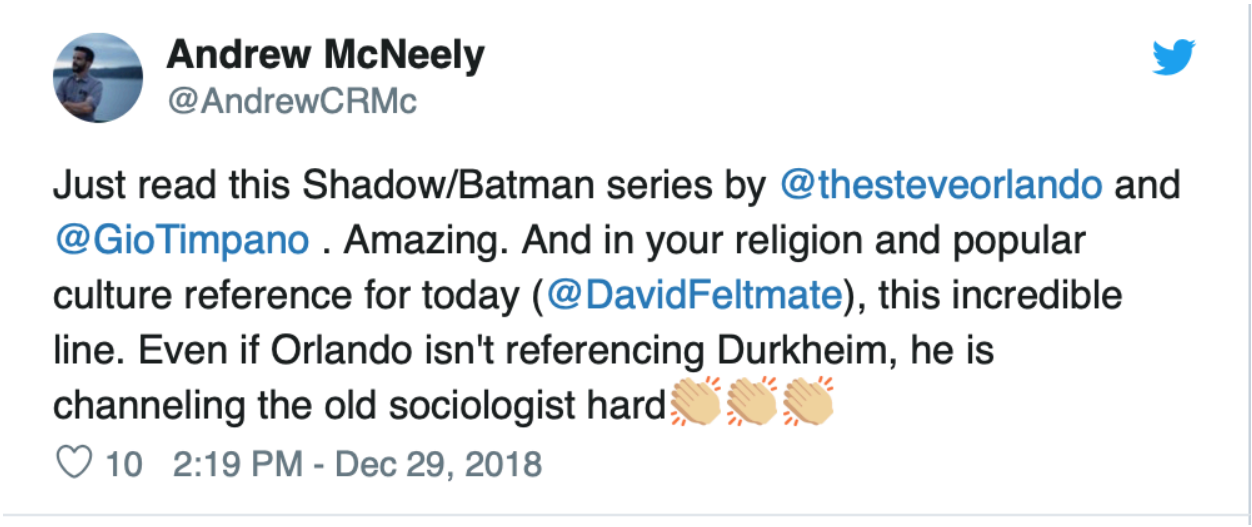
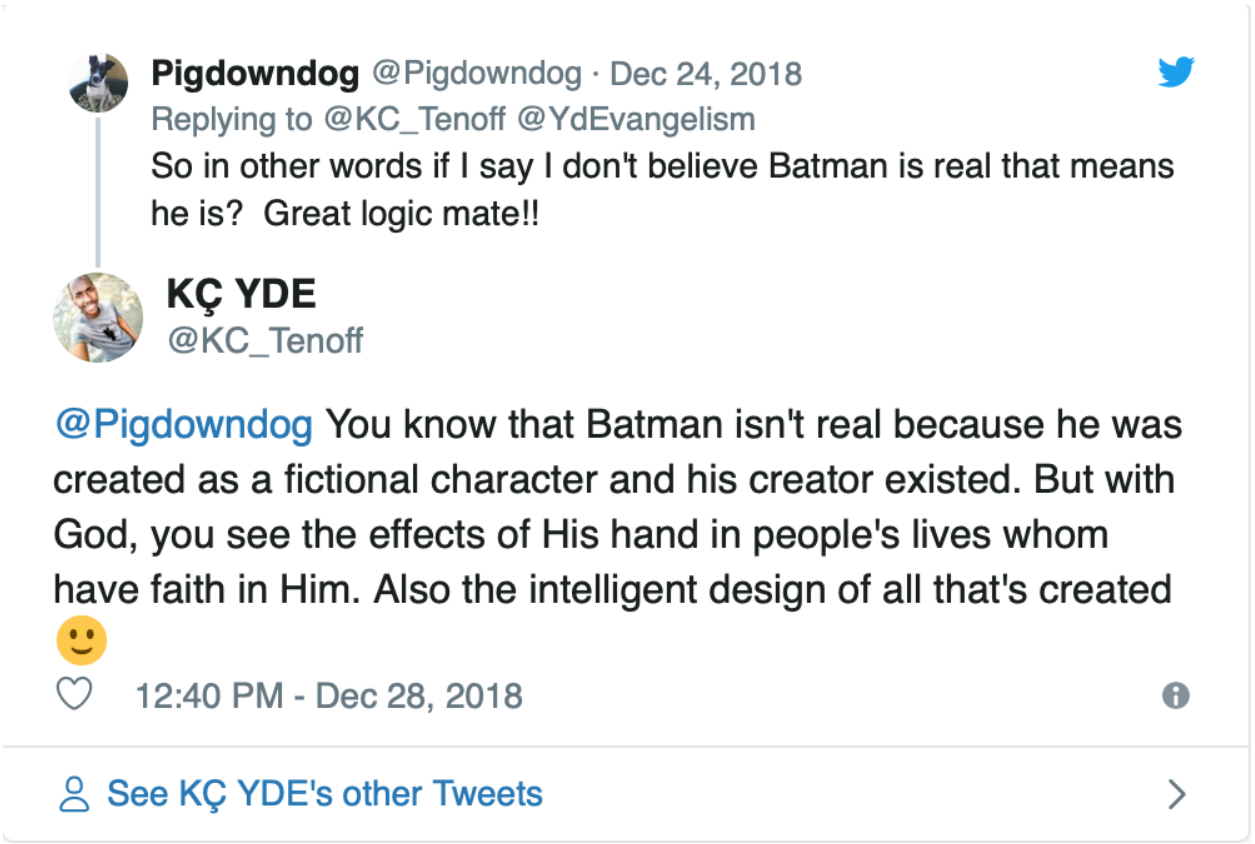


Image accompanying tweet removed for copyright reasons



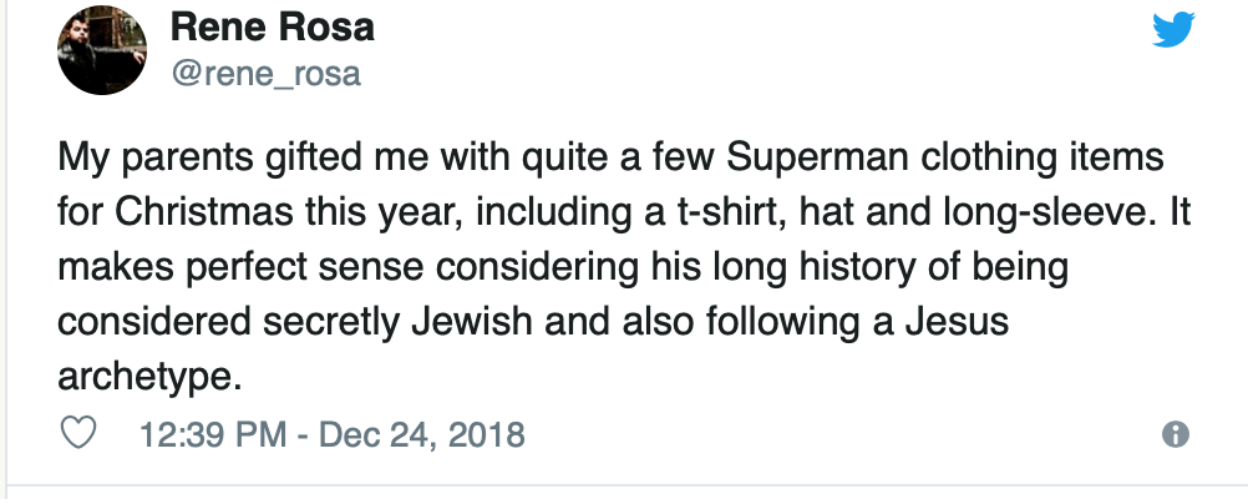
Pigdowndog @Pigdowndog · Dec 24, 2018
Replying to @KC_Tenoff @YdEvangelism
So in other words if I say I don't believe Batman is real that means he is? Great logic mate!!

KÇ YDE
@KC_Tenoff

@Pigdowndog You know that Batman isn't real because he was created as a fictional character and his creator existed. But with God, you see the effects of His hand in people's lives whom have faith in Him. Also the intelligent design of all that's created 🙂

12:40 PM - Dec 28, 2018

See KÇ YDE's other Tweets



Rene Rosa
@rene_rosa

My parents gifted me with quite a few Superman clothing items for Christmas this year, including a t-shirt, hat and long-sleeve. It makes perfect sense considering his long history of being considered secretly Jewish and also following a Jesus archetype.

12:39 PM - Dec 24, 2018

Barend Botha 🏔️🎸
@ArendBotha

"Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith first,the trust part comes later." - Clark Kent #superman

♡ 2 3:07 AM - Dec 26, 2018

Graphic Policy
@graphicpolicy

Superman Isn't Jewish (But I Am… Kinda) is an impressive graphic memoir that explores self, religion, and pop culture. #comics #graphicnovels #graphicmemoir graphicpolicy.com/2018/12/30/rev…

♡ 2 12:01 PM - Dec 30, 2018

RLangford @RLangford18 · Dec 27, 2018
Replying to @frackingzionist @Recursion_Agent
Adaptations by definition are unfaithful
Does anyone know what Jesus was really like?
Religions are political ideologies

Yael
@frackingzionist

The bible sticks to several key themes. One of them being an ethic of universal love and compassion towards one's enemies.

Depicting Jesus as a violent revolutionary is like having Batman kill people and not care about it.

6:12 AM - Dec 27, 2018


Guilty Leon @jonathannero111 · Dec 30, 2018
Replying to @PitchAFett and 2 others
Because mos does not depict clark superspeed to be so such supernatural that he is blur to the people surrounding. That is why his identity secret have more weights here. Clark does not really have best way to conceal his detection.
Guilty Leon
@jonathannero111
Plus like i say, clark respect other people will and does not just force his way against other people simply because he thinks he is right and everyone is wrong. This is why like i said this how superman avoid playing god and becoming a guy who abuse his power and authority
1
10:00 AM - Dec 30, 2018

jmatonak @jmatonak · Dec 29, 2018

Replying to @Doubting_Tom

That bathtub scene does look neat. Amy Adams is gorgeous. But that's, like, three minutes of a very long movie where Superman dies so Batman can Learn A Lesson, and I don't like that at all.

prettypickwick
@prettypickwick

Superman doesn't die to teach Batman a lesson. He dies to save the world from Doomsday. In doing so, he proves to Bruce that "Men are still good" and changes the way the entire world relates to Superman. He is no longer a god; he's a guy trying to do the right thing.

♡ 2 4:20 PM - Dec 30, 2018

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

'Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven' (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix D:

‘Religion and Comics: A Match Made in Heaven’ (originally published In J. C. Adam and I. A. Reblin, (Eds.). *Religião, mídia e cultura*. São Leopoldo: Faculdades EST, pp. 89-98.)

Text removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix E:

Ali Hashmi rated it 5 stars (July 19, 2015)
it was amazing

Recommended by many of my friends, one of the best decisions I've made in life is reading this graphic novel or comic book as Alan Moore himself prefers.
From start to the very end , this book does not disappoint, it discusses topics of great controversy in depth, a satire of modern comic book characters, religion and politics, it doesn't shy away from describing the tragedies and downfall of humanity. With characters so memorable and their progression described with such brilliance, my acknowledgment for the writer knows no bounds. Chapters that modern film makers even, cant reproduce. The art by Dave Gibbons has been mesmerizing from the start, the darkness and contrast, so utterly satisfying.
A must read for people who read comics and for those who do not for this is a brilliant piece of literature and a visual masterpiece.

Tyler rated it 5 stars (August 8, 2011)
it was amazing

Just re-read this after 5 or 6 years knowing that the film adaptation is due to hit theaters soon. It's described as a murder mystery cast by super-heros and super-villains, but it quickly turns into an apocalyptic tale politics, religion, science, and world peace. I have never read anything like this before. It's over 20 years old and is still one of the freshest comics ever written.

Jim rated it 5 stars (July 30, 2011)
it was amazing

Themes.

A lot of this seems like it’s about taking on society.

“It is the oldest ironies that are still the most satisfying: man, when preparing for bloody war, will orate loudly and most eloquently in the name of peace.”

The chapter on Rorschach was dark! I thought it was interesting how it was all about not looking into the darkness lest you become the darkness. Rorschach was who I wanted to be when I was young and stupid and didn’t realize who the real criminals were. Now I’m worried I might want to be Ozymandias. That’s not better.

What is this book about? Is it about the darkness and depravity of humankind?

Is it about this quote from the *The Black Freighter* comic?

“Finally, faced with horrors both intolerable and unavoidable, I chose madness.”

Is this what we have left?

I had to re-read it as I began to watch the HBO series.

Interestingly, the latin motto of the policemen is basically “Who Watches the Watchmen?”

It also made me think a lot about what we are doing to right the wrongs in our society. The doomsday clock is ticking. Armageddon is approaching. What are we doing with our time??

“An intractable problem can only be resolved by stepping beyond conventional solutions.”

Other themes include, what happens when we put ourselves above others? In the book this leads to two opposite outcomes. 1. Completely isolating yourself from everything because you are so disconnected. 2. Setting yourself up as savior - where the ends justify the means.

The ends justify the means. We get this from the Christian religion. Eternal salvation of a select few justifies the torture and murder of a god. Eternal salvation of a select few justifies the eternal torture of everyone else. “To make an omelet, you’ve got to break a few eggs” seems to be the Christian God’s motto. Does this make the Old Testament God that the Jews worship more compassionate than the New Testament God that the Christians worship? Or maybe that’s the theme of the entire Bible? But Jesus didn’t preach that, did he? Is that what the Bible says - or just what we got out of it? It’s what Christians evangelize. Is what Christians preach about the Bible really in there? History says maybe not.

Ozymandias came to an interesting conclusion. “What does fighting crime mean, exactly? Does it mean upholding the law when a woman shoplifts to feed her children, or does it mean struggling to uncover the ones who, quite legally, have brought about her poverty?”

“I see the 20th century as a sort of race between enlightenment and extinction.”

Yes! That’s what this feels like, too!

But what gives me shivers in reference to the current HBO series is the next sentence:

“I see the 20th century as a sort of race between enlightenment and extinction. In one lane you have the four horseman of the apocalypse…”

(“…and in the other?” The Interviewer asks…)

“The seventh cavalry.”

Is it all grey area? What’s right and what’s wrong? What can we do but try to do our best to make the most people’s lives better?

It’s hard to be human.

Like Laurie says, “People’s lives take them to strange places. They do strange things…”

And then we have the set up for Watchmen. The newspaper says “RR to run in 88?”

And I think “Ronald Reagan?”

The next page at a newspaper office, someone is trying to find some filler. “Robert Redford says he’ll be running for President in ‘88. We could run a piece on…” “We do not dignify absurdities with coverage. This is still America god damnit! Who wants a cowboy actor in the White House?”

Who indeed?

So the newspaperman reaches for something in the “crank file”. It’s Rorschach’s journal, sent to them by Rorschach a few days prior. Is this where the seventh cavalry gets their fascist sentiment? Hmmmm…

Mea rated it 5 stars (February 27, 2009)
it was amazing

So what hasn't been said about this already? This book was recommended to me eons before the movie was in the works, and I had a note in my little book that I should pick it up. I admit, though, that I'm not an original follower of this graphic novel, and I was influenced by the artwork that I saw and the teaser trailer that nearly stopped my heart last summer. I also now know that the movie will never in a million years be as good as the graphic novel because it is an absolute masterwork. The story is so thorough, the details so intriguing, and the excerpts that pop up between chapters are so fascinating. This challenges not only the formula of the superhero story, but also religion, fate, sacrifice, and morality. I'm glad I didn't know anything about the actual plot before reading it because my jaw actually dropped at some point, and that does not usually happen when I read something. But you already knew it was good.

Nicole rated it 5 stars (Dec 19, 2009)
it was amazing

I started reading this graphic novel in the local bookstore last year when I heard about the upcoming Watchmen movie. I was uncertain about reading this, because I had never read a graphic novel before. But I enjoy superhero movies a lot, and since I had never heard of these characters before, I decided to do some research.

This novel flipped my idea of storytelling upside-down. The twists and turns, the complex characters, all combined to make a Rubik's cube of a plot that left me desperately flipping the

pages for more. Nothing went as expected. I loved it. I am obsessed with this novel, and wish I had one tenth the talent of Alan Moore.

I thought it was going to be an action-filled, hero saves the day sort of thing. Boy was I wrong. And boy was I THRILLED to be wrong. This book is not about superheroes at all, it is about regular men and women struggling with their identities. It is about war and politics. It is about psychology and religion and everything in between.

Thom Beckett rated it 5 stars (August 28, 2008)
it was amazing

This is far from the first time that I've read this wonderful comic, but the more I read it, the more wonderful it is.

On a simple level it's mystery story, or a comment on the superhero, but within that tale lurks a commentary on politics, history, religion, morality and pretty much anything at all you care to name.

As with all the best books, you take something new from it every time that you read it. Most novelists couldn't fit this much into a weighty tome. To squeeze this into a comic book with such style is astonishing. Woe betide anyone who thinks they're good enough to make this into a film. Mr Snyder, you have no idea what you're trying to do.

Sean Barrs rated it 5 stars, October 7, 2015.
it was amazing

Morality is a fickle bitch.

This is, simply put, iconic. When any one mentions comics/graphic novels the first thought that enters is an image of the Watchmen. I think there is a strong reason for it. It made me question morality on a scale rarely seen in fiction. Indeed, when considering the characters it is incredibly hard to consider any of them truly good or truly bad. They are simply people who are convinced that they are right.

Take Rorschach, he follows the law to the very letter, but never stops to consider, for a single moment, that there are actually problems with the law; yes, he is violent, but his unique form of vigilante justice is an embodiment of the law's order. He works outside the law to bring the law in a strange sort of way. Then is he not worthy of the justice he administers? Does he go too far? Is he, too, not worthy of punishment? These are hard questions to answer because there are no real answers. There is simply opinion and debate; it all depends on how you view the world. One thing remains certain though, the characters in here are so devastatingly flawed.
On the other hand, you have Ozymandias who looks at the big picture. He sees the world for what it is, and tries to plan accordingly. Except, unlike Rorschach he attempts to tackle the bigger problems. To many, he is simply the villain. In reality he is as obscurely heroic as

Rorschach and just as morally grey. Who has the right to sacrifice life? Who has the right to dictate people and make such a monumental decision? Well, nobody really. Yet, Ozymandias ' actions, essentially, save the world. Who can question his results? His methods are clearly debatable, though it was the only route open to him. There is simply no quantifiable right or wrong in this world; there is only neutrality and hypocrisy.

This is where the self-actualised Comedian comes in. Unlike Rorschach, he is fully aware of his faults and corruptness. Unlike Ozymandias, he perceived that the world has no hope. So, what does he do? He embraces himself and indulges in his own overbearing personality. He knows what he is, and what he reflects, so he relishes in his own nature. He offers no guilt and feels no remorse: he simply doesn't care about anything or anyone. In this he is more neutral than any other character; he isn't in denial; he isn't convinced he is right: he just knows that the world is, essentially, doomed.

So, why not enjoy it? It's all a joke, after all. Right?

There are so many conflicting and self-defeating morals in here. Never before have I read something in which so many people have been wrong, but at the same time so absolutely right. Then there is Jon, the so called God of America, the supreme Dr Manhattan. He is something else entirely. He could have changed everything. His power was practically limitless, but he barely lifted a finger until the last possible moment. And the pointing of that finger was an action that was both terrible and completely necessary. The answer became clear as to the question of his inaction: why should he bother with man? The Comedian got to him in this; he saw something in humanity that wasn't worth saving. Rorschach saw it too, but he still tried to salvage the remnants of society through brutalising the brutalisers. Dr Manhattan, however, was simply too complex and too important to waste his time on the common man. He came through in the end though, surprisingly. Well, kind of. I thought he'd watch the world burn, but humanity did have another protector albeit one who committed necessary evils.

This was such a great piece of fiction; I don't think I could ever do it justice in a review. Parts of this felt too intricate to put into words. This is a complete subversion of the entire genre and a full questioning of the flawed, and hypocritical, nature of humankind. It is a piece of work that will, simply put, never be forgotten by those that have experienced its mortifying splendour. This is the first comic book I've seriously considered to be great; it has become a gateway for me to explore the comic book universe that I've barely touched in the past.

So I ask you this: what comic book should I read next? Can any other comic really compare to this?

Zoeb rated it 5 stars (March 25/2018)
it was amazing

What else remains to be said about 'Watchmen'? As if the well-known plaudits for this massive masterpiece are not enough, it would be insufficient to call it the greatest, most glorious moment in the history of comics, let alone just DC Comics. No, ladies and gentlemen, 'Watchmen', illustrated by one of the truly legendary artists of the medium and most crucially penned by one of the most seminal writers and fantasists of the 20th century, is so, so much more.

This was the third time that I had been reading this and while it was frequently interrupted by other books contending for my attention, I realized that it was on this third reading session that this book became almost like a Bible for me, a sort of a grand, mythological revelation that proves just what miracles can happen when all the brilliance and storytelling powers of an iconic writer and a dynamic artist combine to create an urban legend of the highest order.

Nothing will be said about the plot, about those shocking, often startlingly ruthless twists and turns, about the harsh and heartbreaking deconstruction of our superheroes that it offers, with Moore probing our raw nerves by making us alternately appalled, bemused, luridly aroused and even downright disgusted and shocked by our costumed heroes and heroines as their demons spill out in blood, bone, flesh, tears, seminal fluid and more across Gibbons' absorbing, textured, almost grime and gore-splattered panels.

Rather it is about the sheer scale of the narrative, hurtling from the claustrophobia of the New York ghettos to the desolate, devastatingly beautiful vistas of Mars, from the fire and fury of Vietnam War to the paranoia and foolhardy of the Cold War and how it becomes surreal as it darkens by each page, from an atomic deconstruction chamber to an Antarctic fortress of solitude. Gibbons' utter mastery of the nine-grid format, aided immeasurably by John Higgins' luminous yet always gritty and coherent coloring, brings throbbing, organic life to Moore's pulse-pounding writing, alternating from being poetically introspective to probing and incisive in suspense and violence.

And yet, the thing that stuck me the most after this latest re-read is that rare thing- detail. I mean it 'rare' because it is indeed something subversive especially in the genres of both serious and popular fiction. There is so much of a hidden treasure to unveil and unearth in each and every page and while enough has been said about the repeating motifs and allegorical symbols, as well the striking allusions that Moore weaves ingeniously into the cartwheeling 'Tales Of The Black Freighter' story-within-story, it is also admirable to see how the ace writer fleshes out each and every character, incident and plot element, no matter how big and small, with believable depth and pathos. We cringe at their failings, we are shocked at their sins, we share their fears and hopes and we feel for them too.

Also, as a chunky slice of Americana, 'Watchmen' is just peerless, perhaps the finest one in that category too. Coming from an assuredly cynical English perspective means a cutting, almost scalpel-sharp indictment not only of the fallacy of America's nuclear policy but also of how an entire society can bend and contort and then bend again under and against the influence of masked men, the quintessential symbol of fancy propelled by a national mindset to leave bigger things in the hands of either the God-like or the all-powerful. But Moore's tone is frequently candid, too, from veteran masked men remembering the bittersweet heyday of their adventures to

the younger generation believing that maybe there was some thrill or heroic purpose to those seemingly empty fads.

Reading 'Watchmen' for that matter is more than just soaking in commanding prose and art; it is an experience. You will feel terrified, you will feel heartbroken, you will feel inspired, you will also be disgusted by just what violence and anarchy are we capable of and then, there are those moments of pure discovery. This is that book that equates existence to both randomness and radical miracle and that should be alone a reason to discover it on your own terms.

PS- Thank you to my fiancee and my one true love Saiqua for gifting me the grand Deluxe edition of this masterpiece. Sure, I agree with Moore that DC should not have come up with those horrible action figures and those utterly redundant Before Watchmen volumes. But preserving and restoring this masterwork might be their shot at redemption. (less)

Evan rated it 5 stars (April 6, 2009)
it was amazing

This very late adopter of hip hop and graphic novels is overwhelmed by Watchmen.

The copy in my possession has been like a mocking sentinel for two years, moving from this shelf to that one, from floor to desk, from top of pile to bottom and back again. Its yellow brightness always glowed in my peripheral vision. The book was loaned to me in 2009 by a friend (by my own request) and the longer it sat around the more I was determined to do something that has never been done in the annals of humankind: to return a book to its rightful owner after two years despite the fact that any jury of bookreaders would grant me--and any other longterm book borrower--the rights of possession. I just called my friend and told him: mission accomplished, it's coming home. He said: "Oh, I forgot you had it." So, see? I could have kept it.

Two years ago, I made an abortive attempt at Watchmen. The graphics and the words, and the dizzying way in which the story begins, made me lose my bearings. I lost interest fast. I thought maybe graphic novels were not for me.

Then, four nights ago I had a good wine buzz going. I felt impulsive and also had that intense concentration and focus and craving one can get under the influence; akin to the horniness one can suddenly develop on alcohol. I picked up Watchmen, and as one intoxication wore off another one took over. I was hooked.

By the time Dr. Manhattan, the big blue god, is ruminating on the nature of time and history, I knew I was in the presence of something grand. It was one of those moments I occasionally experience, when a key unlocks a door blocking areas of my mind. Like the time philosophy 101 Professor Gary Boelkins explained Plato's forms or the story of the cave during my freshman year of college.

Watchmen is a complex story spanning decades, told in fragmentary form, often with the past present and future co-existing, and more than one narrative woven simultaneously. Like the broken watch of the book, the story comes together much like the pieced-together cogs and gears of a watch. There are dossiers and news clippings and extended passages of text separating the chapters which flesh out the worlds and backgrounds of the characters. The book turns the entire superhero genre on its head. There is no black and white view of good and evil here. Superheroes in Watchmen are just as likely to be proto-fascists as they are benign forces for good. Their blind allegiance to American "values" calls into question whether their power and presence is comforting or dangerous and disturbing. Watchmen presents a world in which both conservatives and liberals can justify genocide as long as it meets their own agenda and ideals. Everyone in Watchmen is admirable and reprehensible, depending on the situation or the dilemma.

The book presents an alternative history of the United States and the world, and even for that, life on the ground for ordinary people seems little different than it actually is. The alternative history is a clever trope that ensures this book can never date.

I saw the Watchmen film two years ago and found it more than slightly ludicrous. Now that I've read and been bowled over by the book and its thematic ambitions and enormous insight, I need to revisit the film and do a fresh comparison.

I could say a lot more, but, needless to say, I was greatly impressed and moved by this breakthrough graphic novel classic.

Greg (adds 2 TBR list daily) Hersom rated it 4 stars (Jan 5, 2011)
really liked it

What if superheroes were real? I mean really "real": what if they grew old and got fat, had spouses and families, carried emotional baggage (sometimes a serious psychosis), and just generally had to deal with everyday life? These super-heroes aren't inherently all good, either. Just like public servants -- police, politicians, doctors, etc. -- many begin with the best intentions, but some become jaded and others are only motivated by self-interest from the start. In other words, if superheroes were real, they would be just like us, more or less.

Also, what would an ultra-powerful superhero really be like? A person who understands quantum theory as easily as we chew gum, and is so powerful that he can move through the space-time continuum, be several places at once, and alter sub-atomic structure with a mere thought? Can you imagine how scary it would be for a god to live among us? Someone whose very citizenship in a particular country gives that country an unbeatable advantage over the rest of the world?

On the surface, this is the premise for Watchmen, and Watchmen was the first work of its kind to humanize superheroes this way, but it's also much more. There are good reasons this graphic novel, or comic book for adults, won a Hugo and was picked by Time magazine as one of the

100 best English-language novels since 1923. (To any literary snobs out there who've talked trash about comics and the like: In your face, Dude!)

Alan Moore made superheroes into real-life people. Then he put these heroes in a paranoid world on the brink of a nuclear holocaust, a world where a symbolic clock that tracks doomsday as 12:00 is currently ticking down to the last few precious minutes. Does that world sound familiar? It should. It was Earth circa 1980's.

This reviewer recalls those times all too well, as I imagine most anyone who lived through the Cold War can. I was mostly just a kid then, but it still seemed inevitable that sooner or later the USA and U.S.S.R would have at each other and the world be damned. In fact, I was in the Army at the time the Watchmen comic was running, in `86 thru `87 (which is probably why I missed it then) and we were training with the Soviets in mind as our enemy. So I found Watchmen to be pretty much... terrifying.

Mr. Moore's insight into modern society and how fragile our world is, unfortunately, rings all too true. It's enough to keep you awake at night. There are probably one or two people left that haven't read Watchmen or seen the movie yet so I won't give away spoilers, but if you take into account the time Watchmen was written and what came to pass years later, it's even a little prophetic.

In a graphic novel, the illustrations tell as much, if not more, of the story than the words. So it's crucial that the artist realize the writer's vision and be inspired by it enough to bring the action and emotion to life. When the writer and illustrator are a perfect match, a graphic novel or comic book becomes a thing of magic. Moore and Dave Gibbon accomplished this with Watchmen.

Even more than the actual imagery, the coloring and shading make this story jump out of the book. Flashes from lightning or explosions almost made me blink. I could practically feel the dampness of a rain-slick street. A horrifying facial expression of a character so angry that he's about to explode with violence all but makes the reader instinctively prepare to flee. Don't overlook the smallest details of each panel. They will be meaningful later.

I have enjoyed a few other graphic novels more than I did Watchmen. But nothing I've ever read has been as frightening as the decision the characters face at the conclusion. It's the kind of decision that, if it really happened, we wouldn't want to know about. And I've never read anything that realizes life's place in the grand scheme of the universe like Watchmen does.

I'm amazed that comics, the very medium that introduced me into the fascinating world of books, turned out to be the medium that produced the most profound book I've ever read.

Rahul Nath rated it 5 stars (September 24, 2012)
it was amazing

"Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not shaped by vague

metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us. Streets stank of fire. The void breathed hard on my heart, turning its illusions to ice, shattering them. Was reborn then, free to scrawl own design on this morally blank world.

Was Rorschach."

Alan Moore's WATCHMEN was included in TIME magazine's list of the 100 best novels of the 20th century. 100 best novels, not graphic novels or comic books or superhero stories. That itself explains in a big way the success, legacy and brilliance of this seminal work. It is more than a graphic novel. It is more than a comic book. It is beyond any conventional work of any genre you may have seen. Watchmen is a seminal piece of art.

Ironically, the very genre people are usually too eager to classify Watchmen into, is the one whose boundaries and conventions are shattered right from the opening pages. Have you come across a story containing superheroes, that begins with the death of one? On second thought, calling the characters of Watchmen superheroes wouldn't be correct. They are vigilantes- most, if not all, with very few redeeming qualities that you expect in a hero.

The book presents an alternate history after the Second world war. The setting is bleak, the danger of an imminent nuclear war always looming, and the world changed in ways beyond one's imagination due to the existence of the world's first and only meta human- Dr Manhattan. Through pages of notes taken from fictional autobiographies and books written by the first generation of costumed vigilantes- dubbed The Minutemen, Alan Moore shows us the motivations behind each character donning a costume and the aftermath.

The current generation of vigilantes have been outlawed by the government, all but Rorschach- the never compromising, never surrendering, unforgettable antihero at the core of this saga. Also, someone is killing off ex-vigilantes and Rorschach is determined to uncover the real truth. Public opinion of him ranges from loathing to dismissing him as insane however, and even his peers try their best to maintain distance. Add to that the threat of the incoming Nuclear war, and Dr Manhattan's epic character arc unlike any other you have read ANYWHERE, and Watchmen has a once in a lifetime plot for a graphic novel already.

But where this book transcends all others, is in it's showcasing of the power of the medium. Watchmen flaunts the strength of storytelling via the graphic novel medium- dangles things possible only in this medium to impress the readers and boy does it work! The story within the story of The Cursed Mariner, which ominously parallels the theme prevalent in the main plot, the entire chapter of The Watchmaker, and the Fearful Symmetry chapter- where the central page acts as a mirror, with every page before and after it acting as mirror images to move the plot forward show Alan Moore's daring innovativeness and originality. As if he just told all skeptics to suck it.

All graphic novel fans have read this already. It's the Bible of this medium. But even to readers not familiar to this style- Watchmen is a must read. THE one graphic novel to pick if you could read just one? Watchmen.

Every page, every frame, every pane of Watchmen is stuffed with details. It takes much longer to read than the initial page count would suggest, and re-reading this is certain to make you notice things you missed before. All this only serve to make your reading experience richer. The coloring in the pages is very noirish and almost gives off a dystopian feel- it is depressing, grim, devoid of much hope but like Rorschach and the others do- perseverance is the key.

10 Stars. Totally deserving.

Halik rated it 4 stars (April 6, 2011)
really liked it

Evil is not the mugger on the street or even your average rapist or murderer. Evil is the system that fosters them. Evil is created often legally, and there is nothing conventional crime fighting can do to stop it.

So i trashed the Watchmen movie and didn't think i'd ever read the book. But i did, and i am glad. Won't say anything that has already been said. So will stick to a free flow of thoughts.

This is a truly complex piece of art right here. Moore's worldview to me seems somewhat misanthropic, most of his characters are social outcasts by choice. They treat the rest of the human race with derision and pity.

The book is heavy with ironic political analogy. The 'American adventurism' described is both a twisted play at actual Russian invasions into that region as well as strangely prescient of modern day American ventures into the area.

Some concepts like the overarching fear of nuclear war are somewhat dated, but gaining increasing significance as we proceed into an increasingly trigger happy 21st century.

Moore has no pity for American war mongering and meddling in other countries' fates, and is directly critical of the political establishment. Nixon is particularly derided. And even hinted at as being shadily connected to the JFK assassination.

The storytelling is a multi layered affair. I feel he has used the comic book format to maximum effect. The pictures and words carry their own thought streams and are almost independent of each other. Yet they mix and mesh together to form a compelling and thought provoking story.

The artwork, while nothing too spectacular, is detailed and provides a lot of information in a did-you-notice-that-graffiti-on-the-wall kinda way. No detail is added idly. Every thing seems to have a purpose, efficient use of space I would say.

The story dissects good and evil and attempts to find an underlying basis. And fails. It ultimately tells you that the human race is doomed to recreate cycles injustice and evil, to destroy itself over and over again.

Admittedly this type of worldview and message plays a lot on your spiritual beliefs. There is a lot of philosophy and metaphysics thrown on the table. To me as Muslim it was an insight into a different perspective on life.